



Written in Stone?  
A Reading of St. Magnus Cathedral at Kirkwall as a Historical  
Document.

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By  
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## Summary

This paper is intended as an exploration of the architectural, cultural and ecclesiastical aspects surrounding Earl Ragnvald Kolsson's claim to Orkney, his rise to power and his founding and building of the cathedral dedicated to Saint Magnus at Kirkwall. Furthermore the paper examines the cathedral architecture in search of elements that may be viewed as part of a political strategy to assert Ragnvald's power throughout the islands and advocate his claim to the Earldom.



## Acknowledgements

When I embarked on my studies at the University of Oslo in 2005 it was not my intention to study Medieval History. I wanted to study ancient history and when I realised I had gotten in to the medieval program my intention was to start there, so as to get my foot in the door and the manoeuvre my way around the system once I was in. This is not what happened. The teachers, staff and students connected to the interdisciplinary medieval milieu at the University created an atmosphere of intellect and friendliness that was staggering and when, shortly after the University decided to terminate the medieval program it was too late – I had fallen in love with it and there was no chance I was going to quit!

Several individuals need to be recognised here. First and foremost, a big ‘thank you’ to my most excellent supervisor, Professor of Art History Lena Liepe, for her watchful eye, constructive criticism and for reeling me in whenever my mind would start to wander and keeping me on track throughout the process of writing this thesis– you rock!

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Everyone in and around Nr. 30 & Nr. 4 for their friendship, support, ideas, comments and company. And for always keeping the beer cold!

All pictures, unless otherwise noted, are my own – as are any mistakes or inaccuracies that may occur throughout this thesis.

The front cover picture is taken from:

MacGibbon, David & Thomas Ross: *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland* (vol. I.).

Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1896, p. 268.

Hegdehaugsveien November 2011.

Sindre Vik



Langsomt blir allting til  
Skapelsen varer evig.  
Mørket ble lys og lyset ild,  
og mennesket våknet en dag og sa:  
Jeg vil!

-Inger Hagerup-

Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky  
with one hand wavin' free

-Bob Dylan-



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**PART I**  
**Introduction**



## 1. Introduction and aim:

In the year 1136 Earl Ragnvald Kolsson summoned his men to a meeting at a place outside the city of Bergen, on the west coast of Norway. Sometime during this meeting the Earl held a long and thundering speech wherein he proclaimed that he would claim what was rightfully his, or die trying. The Earl wished to claim for himself what he believed already belonged to him and his family, namely the Earldom of Orkney. The anonymous writer of the *Orkneyinga Saga* tells us how the men at this meeting all heartily agreed with the Earl and they all swore allegiance to him there. His father, Kol, told him that if he were successful, to...

“...build a stone minster at Kirkwall more magnificent than any other in Orkney, that you'll have it dedicated to your uncle, the holy Earl Magnus and provide it with all the funds it may need to flourish. In addition, his holy relics and the Episcopal seat must be moved there.”<sup>1</sup>

“...látir gera steinmusteri í Orkneyjum í Kirkjuvági, ef þú fær þat ríki, þat er ekki sé annat dýrlígra í því landi, ok látir Magnúsi jarli Helga, frænda þínum, ok leggir þar fé til, svá at sá staðrmætti eflask, ok yrði þangat komit hans helgum dómi ok byskupsstólinum með.”<sup>2</sup>

In this thesis I will perform an interdisciplinary study on the architectural, cultural and ecclesiastical aspects of St. Magnus cathedral in Kirkwall, Orkney. Today a part of Scotland, the Orkney Islands were part of Norway from late the 9<sup>th</sup> century until the latter half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> The cathedral was, as Stewart Cruden remarks, ‘Founded by a Norseman, named after a Norseman, for the veneration of Norsemen’<sup>4</sup> and the building is as such, probably the best preserved Norwegian medieval cathedral today.

When construction began on Kirkwall cathedral, this small group of islands off the northern coast of Scotland already possessed a cathedral church, built by the mighty Earl Thorfinn at his residence on the island of Birsay almost a century earlier. This cathedral, notwithstanding its unimposing size, was a cathedral church like any other with a resident bishop appointed to the Orkneys by the archbishop of the Metropolitan See at Hamburg/Bremen. The cathedral at Birsay was performing all the tasks one would expect

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<sup>1</sup> *Orkneyinga Saga: The History of the Earls of Orkney*. Translated by Hermann Pálsson & Paul Edwards. London: Penguin Classics, 1981, p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> *Orkneyinga Saga*. Finnbogí Guðmundsson (ed.). *Íslensk Fornrit vol. 34*. Reykjavík: hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1965, p. 159.

<sup>3</sup> Mooney, John: *The Cathedral and Royal Burgh of Kirkwall*. Kirkwall: W. R. Mackintosh, 1947, pp. 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Cruden, Stewart: *Scottish Medieval Churches*. Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers LTD., 1986, p. 118.

from a cathedral church.<sup>5</sup> It was at this place Earl Magnus Erlendsson was first laid to rest after being treacherously slain by his cousin Hákon. It was also here the first reported signs of his sanctity came about. Nevertheless, at some point in time, a decision was made to dissolve the firmly established See at Birsay, exhume the body of the murdered earl, and unite the two within the grand, new edifice that was begun erected at Kirkwall in 1137. The events surrounding the translation to Kirkwall have been recorded in the so-called *Orkneyinga Saga*, a unique historical document and the only medieval manuscript to have Orkney as its central place of events.

It is the purpose of this thesis to approach the saga and the cathedral as historical evidence. The main question this thesis seeks to answer is: Is it possible to ‘read’ the building as a historical document and interpret the choice of architectural elements as part of a political strategy by Ragnvald to assert his claim to the Earldom? Was architecture a tool in winning the hearts and minds of the Orcadians? And if so, is there any coherence between what the written, primary sources tell us of Ragnvald’s campaign and what we can ‘read’ from the building today? As part of the investigation I will examine Ragnvald’s reasons for investing such enormous resources, both time, money and labour to raise a grand new cathedral in the honour of St. Magnus when he was already interred at Birsay and venerated as a saint there? Why could he not just entertain the cult of relics and the veneration of his uncle at the already established seat of power at Birsay? And secondly, what were the consequences for the Earldom of Orkney? What did it mean to have such a large memorial built in such a small place, out in the middle of the ocean? Or was it really that excluded from the rest of Scandinavia and the Norse world at large? This thesis is then, an interdisciplinary study of St. Magnus cathedral at Kirkwall as a historical document and remnant from the campaign of Ragnvald Kolsson.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of this project my sources will inevitably consist of material from more than one discipline. It is my hope and intention that this will give a multifaceted, thorough and accurate picture of the times in which Earl Magnus Erlendsson lived and died, as well as the society that honoured him and raised a cathedral in his memory. The two primary sources of my investigation will be the cathedral itself and the *Orkneyinga Saga*, or *The History of the Earls of Orkney*, as it has been known.

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<sup>5</sup> Andersen, Per Sveaas: ‘The Orkney Church of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries – A stepdaughter of the Norwegian Church?’ in: Crawford, 1988, p. 59.



### 1.1. Primary sources

Kirkwall cathedral is, of course, the most obvious source and will be approached in somewhat of an art historical manner. I will provide a thorough description of the cathedral, both inside and out, as well as a chronology of construction. I shall examine the building's architectural elements, both structural and decorative, as well as other features that may reveal something about the edifice, the masons who built it and where both they and the influences they carried with them came from. I will also establish links to other cathedrals by comparative analysis, to be able to put Kirkwall cathedral into a larger context of Norwegian, English and Scottish cathedral building. It is my belief that Kirkwall cathedral, as well as any other cathedral for that matter, may be viewed both as *remnant* and, in a somewhat transferred sense, as *text*. By text, I mean that it is possible to 'read' the building and its architectural elements in order to gain a greater understanding of the time and circumstances in which it was produced. It is a product of the past and as such it contains certain information that may be extracted from the stone. Although the building today serves as the parish church of Kirkwall, subject to the bishop in Aberdeen, I will throughout this paper refer to it as Kirkwall cathedral as it was intended from the start.

The *Orkneyinga Saga* is another important source which in some detail speaks of the planning and construction of the new cathedral at Kirkwall and the social and cultural implications this had on the islands. The saga also tells of the life of the founder, Earl Ragnvald Kolsson and his ancestry and it is my belief that an examination of the founder will yield information on the building as well. The *Orkneyinga Saga* will be handled in a more textual, or philological way. For this thesis I have used the 1978 translation of the *Orkneyinga Saga* by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, re-printed by Penguin Books in 1981. This edition of the saga bases itself on a 1965 Old Norse edition published by Finnogi Guðmundsson at Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, which has also been consulted. However, due to my limited knowledge of the Old Norse language, the 1965 edition is only used for quotations and for double checking my facts. The *Orkneyinga Saga* is a fascinating work which will be dealt with more thoroughly at a later point in this paper. Both Guðmundsson as well as Pálsson & Edwards have divided the text into chapters, and the two editions correspond with each other. Whenever I refer to a specific chapter it is this division that I am referring to.

### 1.2. Secondary sources & historiography

Some of the earliest, modern day academic approaches to St. Magnus cathedral were made by Sir Henry E. L. Dryden in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1871 he published his 23 page

*The Church of Saint Magnus in Orkney* in which he gives a presentation of the burgh and the parish as well as a short history and description of the cathedral itself. He accounts for the different styles of architecture used in the building and attempts to place them within a continental context. Seven years later, in 1878, Dryden published the same paper again in a new and edited form in a small book called *Description of the Church of Saint Magnus and the Bishops Palace at Kirkwall*. Here the basic features and measurements of the cathedral are explained once again, albeit a little more thoroughly this time. The book is small in size and only 87 pages long, whereof almost two thirds are devoted to the cathedral. Dryden writes with a clear and “straight to the point” pen. It is a short, sober and comprehensible introduction to the building, and, as such it marks a dawning in the awareness of the past and also the beginning of modern day historical research.

To the student of Scottish churches and ecclesiastical buildings, David MacGibbon & Thomas Ross’ massive, three volume work, *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland* dating from 1896/’97 is mandatory reading. It meticulously accounts for, if not all then at least the vast majority of, ecclesiastical buildings in Scotland and the isles, and is widely regarded as a standard reference work in the field. The three volumes comprise almost 1700 pages of comprehensible text as well as accurate drawings, floor plans and layouts of the many different churches, abbeys and cathedrals throughout Scotland and the isles. Their chapter on Kirkwall cathedral is one that has been referenced by almost anyone dealing with the building. They give an account of the buildings measurements, its different styles, its placement in the landscape and somewhat of a historical background, before going into a more specific architectural analysis of the different parts of the cathedral, the inventory, some of the tombs found within as well as the bells in the steeple and the stained glass windows, before ending with a short note on the more modern history of the building. All in all MacGibbon & Ross paint a very clear picture of a cathedral with a history which is anything but straightforward. They were, as far as I can tell, the first to establish a basic chronology in the construction of the building. They do however, never attempt to date the different elements of the building but rather they define the different styles that have been used, much in the same way as Dryden did before them. Although published late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century this work has quite recently been characterized as “the most comprehensive descriptive inventory of our medieval churches...”<sup>6</sup> I have throughout this thesis used some of the drawings made

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<sup>6</sup> Cruden (1986), p. x.

by MacGibbon and Ross to illustrate my text, both when it comes to Kirkwall cathedral as well as the Royal Abbey at Dunfermline.

Another standard reference work on Orkney is Norwegian and is dated 1906. The *Monumenta Orcadica* was authored by Norway's first professor in art history; Lorentz Dietrichson and his companion to the Orkneys during the summer of 1900, the architect Johan Meyer. The book is divided into two sections wherein the second part is the original work. It is written in Norwegian and gives a very thorough description of Orkney and her Norse past, whereas the first part is an abridged version, written in English, in which the author passes with "great brevity over those parts of the original version in which the author's views coincide with those of previous writers..."<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless the English versions sometimes make certain points not mentioned in the Norwegian original. The English, first part of the book has its own set of page numbers, and it is the same for the latter, Norwegian part which begin again at page 1 almost halfway through the volume.

Professor Dietrichson gives a fine, if somewhat romantic introduction to the cathedral at Kirkwall, its history and its cultural context, while leaving the more technical aspects of the edifice to architect Meyer who has written quite an extensive and meticulous essay concerning the building itself. In it he analyses the different architectural aspects as well as the architectural history of the cathedral. He ends his essay with a comparison of the cathedral with buildings of the same period in Scotland and Norway. His essay is beautifully illustrated with pencil sketches made by himself. Much the same as MacGibbon & Ross' *Ecclesiastical Architecture*, Dietrichson & Meyer's *Monumenta* has also been considered one of the cornerstones when it comes to Orkney research and is widely in use to this day.

In 1932, the author and Orkney scholar J. Storer Clouston published his *A History of Orkney*, another work which would become somewhat of a standard syllabus for anyone concerning themselves with Orkney, Kirkwall and the cathedral of St. Magnus. Clouston aims to give the reader a comprehensible and, at the time, up to date rendering of the history of the isles, and, in his own words, "to state what seems safe to say of Orkney's past in the light of present knowledge, regardless of whether it conflicts or agrees with what was written in the light of less knowledge."<sup>8</sup> It is the first *modern* history of the islands. It has, quite recently been said of Clouston that his great interest was "in the Norse period, and that he gave rather

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<sup>7</sup> Dietrichson, Lorentz & Johan Meyer: *Monumenta Orcadica: Nordmændene paa Orknøerne og deres efterladte Mindesmerker*. Kristiania: Alb. Cammermeyers Forlag, 1906, p. 1. English version.

<sup>8</sup> Clouston, J. Storer: *A History of Orkney*. Kirkwall: W. R. Mackintosh, 1932, p. xiv.

insufficient attention to the succeeding centuries.”<sup>9</sup> This however should not be of any problem, nor of any concern for my thesis as its focus will be almost exclusively on the period of Norse rule in the islands which ended in 1486.

John Mooney, a native Orcadian and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, has published much on the subject of Orkney and St. Magnus throughout the years. In 1935 *St. Magnus – Earl of Orkney* was published, and in 1947 *The Cathedral and Royal Burgh of Kirkwall* was published, both at Kirkwall. They are both instructive works giving ample historical knowledge to the reader.

Hugh Marwick’s *Orkney* from 1951 aims to provide, much like Clouston, a coherent history of the islands from the time before humans arrived there and up until his own time, with a special emphasis on the Norse earldom. Like Clouston he ends up devoting half the book to the Norse period in the isles and rapidly passes through the later centuries up into modern times.

Among more modern publications we find *St Magnus Cathedral and Orkney’s Twelfth Century Renaissance* edited by Barbara Crawford. This is a compilation of articles published in the wake of the cathedral’s 850<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference, held in 1987. The book is divided into three sections, dealing with the *history, architecture and culture* of Kirkwall and the cathedral. The articles range a number of topics from the development and organisation of the Christian church in Europe and the North/West Atlantic regions in the Middle Ages, worship and the cult of relics in the Middle Ages to architectural aspects, styles and influences. The book also deals with the figuring of St. Magnus in medieval cultural life as well as in the poetry, art and music of Scandinavia and Scotland in the Middle Ages. Of the contents in Crawford’s book I have drawn mostly on the chapters dealing with the architecture of the cathedral written by Eric Cambridge, Richard Fawcett and Stewart Cruden.

H. W. M. Cant & H. N. Firth’s *Light in the North – St. Magnus Cathedral through the Centuries*, published in 1989 is a small book and whose contents could very well have been a part of Crawford’s book mentioned above. It too was published after the 850<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the cathedral and contains nine chapters, all authored by Orkney scholars and gives the reader insight into the origin and context of St. Magnus cathedral all the way through the Middle Ages to the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and all the way up into our own day and age. Notwithstanding its size the contents of the book is informative and it very nicely supplements Crawford’s earlier book.

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<sup>9</sup> Thomson, William P. L.: *History of Orkney*. Edinburgh: The Mercat Press, 1987, p. xi.

Former Principal Inspector of Ancient Monuments in Scotland, Stewart Cruden's contribution to the research on St. Magnus cathedral has been one of importance although he has not written much - he has published the same article at least three times albeit with certain editorial measures. Originally it was published in 1977, then again in 1986 and finally in Crawford's book in 1988. Cruden argues for the so-called apse theory - that the original layout of the cathedral had a central apse in which the shrine of St. Magnus was kept and that this was based on the layout of Durham cathedral in northern England and the way the shrine of St. Cuthbert was stored and displayed there.

Of more recent works on Kirkwall cathedral must also be mentioned a paper written by Professor Malcolm Thurlby and published in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* in 1997. In his paper, titled 'Aspects of the architectural history of Kirkwall Cathedral', Professor Thurlby considers the intended form of the Romanesque east end of the cathedral as well as the failure of the Romanesque crossing and select areas of the transepts, nave and choir. He explores the main arcades in the extension of the eastern arm and their place in the architecture of medieval Britain. Professor Thurlby gives a thorough and skilled analysis of a small, but very important part of the cathedral.

Finally, William P. L. Thomson's *History of Orkney* from 1987 and *New History of Orkney* from 2008 has much the same aim as Clouston's *History* but has a more modern approach and takes into consideration the research that has been done in the 55 years that separate them. Thomson's *History* is another work that is widely regarded as a standard work in Orkney scholarship and is today the most up to date and thorough history of the islands.

### **1.3. Methodology**

To be able answer the central questions of this thesis I will make use of both History and Art History as well as touching upon Philology. I will examine the use of the edifice itself, the cult of relics and the sagas' references to the building as well as the political and ecclesiastical climate in and around Orkney. This may perhaps seem somewhat patchy at first, but it is my belief that it will result in a nice and exciting interdisciplinary angling with the St. Magnus cathedral and its architectural, cultural and ecclesiastical aspects centre stage. The building itself is the main focus of my project and I will approach it from several angles. Based on visual examinations and study of previous scholarship on the building, a thorough, verbal description will form the point of departure for a comparative architectural and stylistic analysis, with the aim of placing the monument in a historical context.

I will examine the architecture with the purpose of establishing links to other ecclesiastical buildings, both in Britain and Norway in order to form a hypothesis concerning where the workers came from, what kind of influences in style and culture they brought with them and the consequences this held for the final result at Kirkwall. The next step is to ask for the motives behind the choices of expertise. Were the craftsmen chosen because they came from a certain place, representing a certain architectural expression that was consistent with what the patrons of the building wanted? Indeed the builders were (largely) foreign, but the supervision was Norwegian, so is it possible to locate any 'typical' Norse/Nordic features or traits in the architecture of the building today?<sup>10</sup>

Another approach will of course be through the text of the *Orkneyinga Saga*. To examine what the saga says on the different aspects of the cathedral - architectural, cultural, political and ecclesiastical. I will use the Saga as a companion to the physical structure of the cathedral as well as to shed light on the political circumstances surrounding Magnus' death, Ragnvalds vow and the subsequent transfer of power and the founding and constructing of the cathedral. What did this imply for the church in Orkney? It will of course be especially important to have a watchful eye on the parts of the saga that deal with the shift in political power in the islands and to keep in mind that the writer or compiler may not have been entirely neutral in these matters. Source criticism will be of the utmost importance here

The saga in the way it appears today has undergone extensive editing over the years and we are left with copies of copies of copies of the original manuscript. The editing of another author's text was for a very long time extremely common and, unlike today, not questioned or frowned upon at all. On the contrary, it was to be expected of an author or editor, sometimes quite explicitly in writing by the original author, to edit his text in order to make it more accurate as past events were seen through the clear glass of retrospect. There was of course no guarantee that this would be the result, but it was nevertheless the common idea throughout the literary community. The saga texts that we are left with today may therefore differ dramatically from how the original once was written, but this is, of course, something that we will never be able to determine without actually getting our hands on the original. I intend to examine the parts of the *Orkneyinga Saga* that mention Ragnvald's conquest of the isles and the political mood at the time to see whether it is possible to extract something on Ragnvald's conquest of the islands and his use of propaganda in connection with the construction of the cathedral and the fulfilment of his vow.

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<sup>10</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 142.

One could argue that it is possible to ‘read’ a building in much the same way as one reads a text and retrieve a certain share of information from studying its features. And so a common denominator for the approach to this project will be of a hermeneutical nature. I will work from a hermeneutical approach to extract data from my sources, to establish some criteria for how to interpret the cathedral, both in a visual as well as in a textual manner, to gain an understanding of the different aspects of the cathedral and time and environment in which it was built.

#### **1.4. Definition of terms and spelling of names**

- *Cathedral*: A cathedral is, per definition, a bishop’s church. The word itself is derived from the Greek *cathedra* meaning chair, adopted in the Middle Ages as to refer to the bishop’s chair or throne. The word was also to give name to the church or house wherein the chair was located – *Domus Cathedralis*.<sup>11</sup> Hence, we see that a cathedral is the church in which the bishop has his chair, or rather the church to which the bishop is connected. The cathedral of St. Magnus is today the parish church of Kirkwall, the Orkney bishopric being transferred to the bishop of Saint Andrews in 1472 and later to the See in Aberdeen under which it remains.<sup>12</sup> There have been attempts to separate the terms *bishop’s church* and *cathedral*<sup>13</sup> although this is not something I feel is necessary to do here. I will, when referring to the church of St. Magnus at Kirkwall, use the term cathedral, as this was the initial purpose and function of the building.

- *The provinces of Nidaros and Saint Andrews*: The province of the medieval Metropolitan See at Nidaros consisted of 10 dioceses in all. These were Nidaros, Oslo, Bergen, Stavanger and Hamar, all in mainland Norway, as well as Hólar and Skálholt in Iceland, the Faeroes, the Orkneys (with Shetland) and Gardar in Greenland<sup>14</sup>.

Although the papacy was unwilling to grant Metropolitan rights to St. Andrews it had by the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century become the head of the Scottish church and St. Andrew was recognised as the ‘leader of the compatriot Scots’.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Schumacher, Jan Henrik: *Kirkehistorisk latinleksikon: Begreper fra middelalderens kirke- og klosterliv*. Oslo: Spartacus, 2002, p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> Thomson, William P. L.: *The New History of Orkney*. Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd., 2008, p. 220.

<sup>13</sup> Lidén, Hans-Emil in Crawford (1988), p. 72.

<sup>14</sup> Jørgensen, Torstein & Gastone Saletnich: *Synder og pavemakt: Botsbrev fra Den Norske Kirkeprovins og Suderøyene til Pavestolen 1438 – 1531*. Stavanger: Misjonshøyskolens forlag, 2004, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Lynch, Michael: *Scotland – A New History*. London: Century Ltd., 1991, pp. 93-94.

• *Spelling of Names:* Unless quoting other sources I have chosen to write the name Magnus in its modern day style – not Magnús as it was in Old Norse. Rather inconsequentially then, have I chosen to use the Old Norse form Hákon instead of the modern day Håkon. English speaking scholars all seem to use either Hakon or Hacon or even the somewhat more archaic, Haco. For the Old Norse name Rognvaldr I have used its modern day, Norwegian spelling: Ragnvald. English speaking scholars mostly seem to use the name Rognvald, but I see no point in using the English version when there is a modern day, Norwegian equivalent in use. When mentioning places and their names I have used the modern way of spelling.



## PART II

### Orkney, Saint Magnus and the Saga



## 2. On the Orkneys

Before proceeding any further, it seems appropriate to give ample introduction to the Orkney Islands in order to contextualise the cathedral and its surroundings somewhat. It is, as Dietrichson & Meyer mention in the introduction to their book, the *Monumenta Orcadica*, peculiar that the northernmost part of the British Isles go by the name *Sutherland* and the northern isles *Suðreyjar*, as it were in Old Norse. Although the islands are thought to have been populated from the south by Neolithic settlers<sup>16</sup> there can be little doubt that the name *Suðreyjar* is one that is given from the north.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, some of the Norse earls that ruled Orkney held both the Islands as a fief from Norway and Caithness from Scotland, although the border to Scotland was not the Pentland Firth as it is today. The southernmost part of the Orkney earldom was to be found somewhere in the Highlands of Scotland.<sup>18</sup> It is a peculiar thought that Norway and Scotland, not that long ago, shared a mainland border with each other.

The Orkney Islands are a group of nearly 70 Islands located just north of mainland Scotland<sup>19</sup> and according to Stewart Cruden, they are “the richest archaeological area in the British Isles.”<sup>20</sup> The first settlers to Orkney are believed to have come across the Pentland Firth sometime around 5500 years ago.<sup>21</sup> The anonymous author of the 12<sup>th</sup> century *Historia Norwegie*, writes that the islands originally were inhabited by Pents and Papes. The Pents are described in the *Historia* as being a pygmy like people who built wonderful houses and towns during morning and evening, but during midday their strength abandoned them completely and they hid in little chambers underground.<sup>22</sup> From these people comes the name of the body of water separating Caithness from Orkney – the above mentioned Pentland Firth. As for the Papes, the appearance of names such as Papa, Papey and Papdale, to name but a few, in modern day Orkney place names may suggest the presence of Irish monks at an earlier time. Indeed there is ample archaeological evidence to support this, from the discovery of bells of the earliest, four-sided shape, sculptures with Christian inscriptions as well as churches dedicated to early Culdeean saints.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Thomson (1987), p. xiv

<sup>17</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Donaldson, Gordon: ‘The Contemporary Scene’ in : Crawford (1988), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Clouston (1932), p. 1.

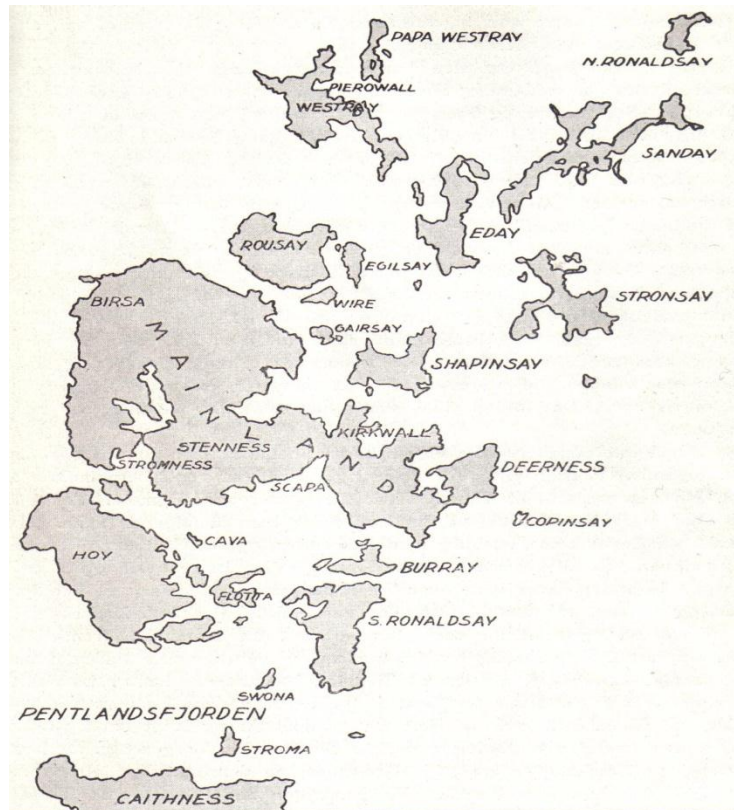
<sup>20</sup> Cruden, Stewart: ‘The Founding and Building of the Twelfth-Century Cathedral of St Magnus’ in: Crawford (1988), p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Thomson (1987), p. xiv

<sup>22</sup> *Historia Norwegie*. Edited by Inger Ekrem & Lars Boje Mortensen. Translated by Peter Fisher. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2003, p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 47.

At the time of the Norse invasion in the latter half of the ninth century the islands were a part of “a kingdom, dominion, or federation of Celtic tribes, whose territories included Orkney, Shetland and the Northern part of Scotland” writes the late Orkney scholar J. Storer Clouston in his *History of Orkney*.<sup>24</sup> This ‘kingdom’ was inhabited by the Picts, a semi – tribal people of which very little is known. In terms of historical evidence they are an elusive people of which nothing remains except a few written



Map from: Brøgger (1930), p. 11<sup>25</sup>

accounts. What happened to the Picts when the Nordic settlers came is a matter of speculation. Archaeologists have not found virtually no remains or artefacts of Pictish origin and the transitional period from Pictish to Norse rule is one of which we know little or nothing. One day, it seems, the Picts are there, the next they are gone. The two main ideas are that they either got killed off by the invaders from the north or, perhaps somewhat more plausible, that they were simply assimilated into the dominating Norse culture. Whatever the case may be, the destiny of the Picts is not something that will be pursued further in this thesis.

Sometime during the Norwegian king Harald Fairhair’s conquest of Norway in the last half of the ninth century several of Norway’s wealthy families and petty kings left their homes for fear of persecution. Many of them travelled west over the sea to places like Iceland, the Faeroes, Shetland and, of course, to Orkney where they settled anew in hope of a life in peace - free from the tyranny taking place in their homeland. After some time as a free-state, Orkney could not escape the ever expanding reaches of the Norwegian king and the islands became subject to the Norwegian crown. The islands were given by Harald Fairhair to his close friend

<sup>24</sup> Clouston (1932), p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Brøgger, Arnfinn: *Den norske bosetningen på Shetland-Orknøyene: studier og resultater*. Oslo: Det Norske Videnskaps Akademi, 1930, p. 11.

and General - Ragnvald, the Earl of Møre, as compensation for the death of his son in the King's service. Ragnvald gave the islands over to his brother Sigurd who became the first Earl of Orkney. It is from him that all the subsequent Earls hail and as such, Sigurd became somewhat of a *pater familias* for what Clouston terms as *The House of Møre* – the ruling class in Orkney.<sup>26</sup> Though nominally a part of the Kingdom of Norway, Orkney enjoyed a high level of independence, and the Earls ruled the islands almost as independent, sovereign princes.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.1. The Orkney church

The origin of the bishopric of Orkney and its first bishops is somewhat clouded. In, or around, the year 1050 the mighty Earl of Orkney, Thorfinn Sigurdsson went on a pilgrimage to Rome. There he obtained papal permission from Pope Leo IX to found a separate bishopric for the islands.<sup>28</sup> Adam of Bremen writes of the appointment of a certain Bishop Henry to the See at Lund in Sweden. Henry, says Adam, had earlier held the title as Bishop of Orkney under King Knut of Denmark and England.<sup>29</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer also take Henry to be the first Bishop of Orkney, consecrated around the year 1030.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, Adam writes that the Archbishop of Hamburg/Bremen was visited by, among others, legates from Orkney, requesting a bishop to the islands.<sup>31</sup> Thorfinn, upon returning from his pilgrimage, had a small church erected at his residence on Birsay, on the west coast of Mainland. Later the *Gesta* mentions how the Archbishop of Hamburg/Bremen appointed a man by the name of Thorulf to the See at Blascona. The name Blascona is uncertain, but it is believed to be a Latinized corruption of the name Birsay, or Birgisherad, as it was known in Old Norse. The first two or three bishops of Orkney all seem to have been appointed from Hamburg/Bremen. However, the next bishops to islands all come from York, until Bishop William I was consecrated in 1102. Exactly where Bishop William came from or who he was is not known, although he is said to have been 'a clerk of Paris and with strong ties to the Norwegian crown.

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<sup>26</sup> Clouston (1932), p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> Dryden, Sir Henry E. L.: *Description of the church of Saint Magnus and the Bishops Palace at Kirkwall*. Kirkwall: William Peace & son, 1878, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer, (1906), p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum / Adam av Bremen – Beretningen om Hamburg stift, erkebiskopenes bedrifter og øyrikene i Norden*. Edited by Bjørg Tosterud Danielsen & Anne Katrine Frihagen. Oslo: Aschehoug & co./Thorleif Dahls Kulturbibliotek, 1993, p. 190.

<sup>30</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), appendices nr. 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Gesta Hammaburgensis* (1993), p. 139.

The line of Orkney bishops considers William I, styled the Old, to be the first one. Bishop William was, according to the Orkneyinga Saga, the first head of the See to reside in the islands<sup>32</sup> and it was under him that the See was transferred from Birsay and Earl Thorfinn's Christ Church to the new cathedral in Kirkwall along with the remains of St. Magnus.<sup>33</sup> William held the episcopate for 66 years – from 1102 until his death in 1168.<sup>34</sup> At the establishment of the new Metropolitan See at Nidaros in 1153/54, Orkney became subject to the Archbishop there.

## 2.2. Kirkwall

The burgh of Kirkwall is the largest in the Orkneys, located on the island of Mainland. The name Kirkwall is derived from the Old Norse *Kirkjuvággr*, *kirk* meaning church and the word *vogr* or *vaagr* (*vágr*) meaning bay.<sup>35</sup> The burgh is laid out as a typical Nordic trading town from this period and its street grid bears strong resemblances to early Nidaros, Oslo and Bergen although recent research has shown that it originated as two separate towns that subsequently grew together.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless it is sometimes said of Kirkwall that it is “Norway’s best preserved medieval town.”<sup>37</sup>

After a series of disputes in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the death of Norway’s king and the outbreak of civil war among the people of Norway, Orkney was pledged away to Scotland in 1468 by a debt stricken King Christian I. The agreement was, and still remains redemptory, but even so the islands remain a part of Scotland to this day.<sup>38</sup> Four years later, in 1472, the diocese of Orkney was removed from Nidaros and placed under the bishop of St. Andrews<sup>39</sup> and in 1486 King James III of Scotland, in a royal charter, vested St. Magnus cathedral to the “magistrates, councillors and inhabitants of Kirkwall”.<sup>40</sup> It remains in their ownership to this day.

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<sup>32</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 97.

<sup>33</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer, English version, (1906), p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Thomson (2008), p. 94.

<sup>35</sup> Dryden (1878), p. 10. Dryden does not differentiate between the use of *vogr* or *vaagr*, whereas in Geir T. Zoëga’s *Concise dictionary of Old Icelandic* from 1926 the word is listed as: *vágr* (-s, -ar) m.

<sup>36</sup> Lamb, Raymond & Judith Robertson: ‘Kirkwall: Saga, History, Archaeology’ in: Owen, Olwyn (ed.): *The World of the Orkneyinga Saga - The Broad Cloth Viking Trip*. Kirkwall: The Orcadian Ltd., 2005, pp. 160-191.

<sup>37</sup> Gibson, Julie: ‘Kirkwall’ in: Muir, Tom: *Orkney in the Sagas – The Story of the Earldom of Orkney as told in the Icelandic Sagas*. Kirkwall: The Orcadian Limited., 2005, p. 74.

<sup>38</sup> Schei, Liv Kjorsvik & Gunnie Moberg: *The Orkney Story*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1985, p. 10.

<sup>39</sup> MacGibbon, David & Thomas Ross: *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland* (vol. 1). Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1896, p. 266.

<sup>40</sup> Mooney (1947), p. 3.

### 2.3. Periphery vs. centrality

The cathedral of St. Magnus stands as a testimony to the Old Norse dominions overseas and shows that Orkney was not, in the words of Stewart Cruden, “the cultural backwaters they are too often assumed to be, but in the full stream of European cultural and artistic development.”<sup>41</sup> Although the body of water separating Orkney from Caithness in Scotland is a quite narrow one, averaging 6 – 8 miles across, the Pentland Firth has several fierce currents, tidal races and whirlpools that will sink a small boat if one is not careful. Notwithstanding the dangers of the North Sea, Orkney in the Viking and Medieval period was a strategically important place, located in the middle of the Scandinavian and British trade and travel routes of the day. Merchants, Viking raiders and pilgrims alike travelling from Norway to the British Isles, Normandy or even further south, perhaps to Rome and the Holy Land would all pass by the islands, stopping there for supplies, repairs and business.

Today the scene in Orkney is quite a different one than what it must have been at one time. A quiet, rural farmland where at many places the only sound one will hear is the wind and the sea, far away from the bustle of the larger industrial cities in mainland Scotland. Thanks to modern modes of transport, Orkney has been pushed somewhat into the periphery, but to the seafaring peoples of the North Atlantic in the Middle Ages, Orkney would have been right at the heart of international travel and commerce.

## 3. On the Orkneyinga Saga

The *Orkneyinga Saga*, or *The History of the Earls of Orkney*, is a unique historical document tracing the lives of the Earls of Orkney for over three hundred years, from the ninth to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is the only medieval chronicle to have Orkney as the central place of events, and as such it is our “main written source for Viking Age and medieval Orkney.”<sup>42</sup> The saga as it appears today, however, has a somewhat problematic genesis and because the saga is the primary written source in this thesis, I believe it is necessary to give ample introduction to the text.

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<sup>41</sup> Cruden, Stewart: ‘The Cathedral and Relics of St. Magnus, Kirkwall’ in Apted, M. R. & al.: *Ancient Monuments and their Interpretation – Essays Presented to A. J. Taylor*. Chichester: Phillimore, 1977, p. 88.

<sup>42</sup> Jesch, Judith & Thea Molleson: ‘The Death of Magnus Erlendsson and the Relics of St Magnus’ in: Owen, Olwyn (ed.): *The World of the Orkneyinga Saga – The Broad-Cloth Viking Trip*. Kirkwall: The Orcadian Limited, 2005, p. 130.

It is generally believed that the Orkneyinga Saga was written by an Icelandic sometime towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> or first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>43</sup> The writer remains anonymous, but he is believed to have been associated with the intellectual centre at Oddi in Southern Iceland,<sup>44</sup> and the saga is believed to have been a well-known and popular story both there and throughout the rest of that country. It was first written down around the same time as Snorri Sturlason wrote his *Olav's Saga* and it was also one of the sources used by Snorri when he wrote his *Heimskringla* or *History of the Kings of Norway*. It was also around this time that *Sverri's Saga* was written down.<sup>45</sup> The Orkneyinga Saga is indeed in the full stream of Icelandic writing tradition at the time. This surely becomes evident when compared to Snorri and the works mentioned above and so it is curious to see how the reviser of the Orkneyinga Saga, some years later, used *Heimskringla* when editing the saga.<sup>46</sup>

Parts of the Orkneyinga Saga remain as fragments found within other sagas. The only volume to contain all the parts of the saga, albeit divided in between different parts of the sagas of the Norwegian Kings, is the so-called *Flateyjarbók*, believed to have been written down in or around 1370. It is, however, probable that the Orkneyinga Saga originally existed as a compilation of texts rather than a single story written by a single individual. It is difficult to characterise the saga in terms of specific genres of Old Icelandic literature and it appears to have been “rather unevenly constructed from a wide variety of source materials.”<sup>47</sup> This seems evident from the inherent character of certain parts of the text. The beginning of the saga, has by Holtsmark, been characterised as mythological, whereas later parts seem to be more skaldic in their nature. The parts that deal with the life and death of St. Magnus have a clear hagiographical feel.<sup>48</sup> This part seems to be rooted in two separate, Old Icelandic, hagiographical texts – the *Magnúss saga lengri* and the *Magnúss saga skemmri* – the longer and shorter Magnus sagas, as well as a Latin legend, the *Legenda de Sancto Magno*. These texts share many similarities with the account of Magnus in the Orkneyinga Saga and it is thought that all four of them derive from a now lost Latin vita believed to have been written by a certain Master Robert sometime in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Nothing of Master Robert's work remains today and we can only speculate as to what it looked like, who he was and where he

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<sup>43</sup> *Orknøyingenes Saga*. Translated by Anne Holtsmark. Oslo: H. Aschehoug & co., 1970, p. 7 and Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 10

<sup>44</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Holtsmark (1970), p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> Jesch, Judith: ‘Literature in Medieval Orkney’ in: Owen, 2005, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> Holtsmark (1970), p. 8.



came from.<sup>49</sup> It has been suggested that the Vita was written as a sermon for the Kirkwall congregation, possibly as early as the 1130's, although it seems it could have been written at any time up to around 1190.<sup>50</sup> The last part of the Orkneyinga Saga is more of an epic tale of heroic men and their deeds – especially Ragnvald Kolsson and Svein Ásleifarson. Over the years the saga has been subject to extensive editing and it can be hard to tell what parts are original and what parts are later additions. Nevertheless, it seems clear from a Danish translation dated 1570, that the original work ended with the death of Svein Ásleifarson in Dublin (chapter 108 in Pálsson & Edwards' translation), and it is further believed that the remaining four chapters were written in or around 1235.<sup>51</sup> In 1873 the saga was first published in an English translation.

When reading the Orkneyinga Saga it is important that the reader always be vigilant and critical. We know nothing of the original author, his political agenda, or his social standings. It tells a story that unfolds over the centuries and we do not know from where the author got this information, or - perhaps more importantly - from whom. Was it delivered orally as a part of an early story-telling culture, and if so has it been altered to add dramatic effect or to please certain audiences at certain times? Or has the original author of the saga read about the events in books found elsewhere and tried to repeat the story as best as he could, perhaps adding or omitting certain sections as he went along? Who then, wrote these other books, and for whom were they written? Is it possible that the contents may have been altered so as not to anger a nobleman or a king somewhere? There are a lot of questions one may ask, yet in the end the important thing is to be aware of what kind of material we are dealing with and also that the story we are reading is not the whole truth, but rather a modified version of it. Indeed it was customary and sometimes almost mandatory for a writer working with a pre-existing text, to alter and edit it as best he knew how. This was done in order for the most complete version of the truth to be told, but in fact the result may have been as truthful as today's online open source encyclopaedias where people may alter and edit as they see fit. Though this opens for an exciting and many-facetted picture of certain events, and is often a good way of getting to know people's views, it also opens for mistakes, forgery and for small (and not so small) lies to seep through.

Although we can never know for certain what is fact and what is fiction, the Orkneyinga Saga is a rich source of information about the kings of Norway, the Earldom of

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<sup>49</sup> Jesch (2005), p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> Jesch & Molleson (2005), p.133.

<sup>51</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 10.

Orkney and the goings on of the people who lived there. It is the only, more or less, contemporary chronicle we have dealing specifically with the Orkneys and their rulers, giving us ample information about the power struggles as well as things of a more everyday nature.

#### 4. The Death of Earl Magnus

The Orkneyinga Saga tells us that Earl Magnus Erlendsson and his cousin Earl Hákon Pálsson held the Orkney earldom jointly, possibly for as long as 10 years,<sup>52</sup> and that they were on friendly terms. Yet something was rotten in the state of Orkney. Magnus had spent much of his time in Scotland and England, as well as in Wales. Hákon on the other hand had strong links to the Norwegian King and nobility. When the cousins met in Orkney it did not take long before relations between them cooled. From the saga we learn that “malicious tongues set out to destroy their friendship, and it was to Hákon the more luckless men were drawn, for he was very envious of the popularity and splendour of his cousin Magnus.”<sup>53</sup> Though this may not be entirely true, the situation got so pressing that both earls gathered their army’s and readied to march on the other. They met at the ‘Thing of the Orkneymen’ where mutual friends and kinsmen on both sides quickly got involved in the matter and negotiated a truce between the quarrelling cousins. The two earls agreed to the terms of the truce, swore oaths and shook hands in agreement. “Shortly afterwards Earl Hákon, with fraud and flattery, fixed a day for a meeting with the blessed Earl Magnus to ensure that their newly agreed peace could neither be distorted nor destroyed”<sup>54</sup> relates the Orkneyinga Saga. The meeting was to take place on the island of Egilsay and they were both to bring two ships and an equal number of men there. The choice of Egilsay for this meeting is somewhat peculiar. Bishop William is mentioned several times in the Orkneyinga Saga as living on the island and the location of the meeting may suggest his involvement somehow, although the saga makes no mention of him as being on the island at the time. It may be, suggests Thomson, ‘that Bishop William was Earl Hákon’s man and a supporter of his and Norwegian policies, whereas Magnus and his followers had a rival bishop installed. One that would be more open and loyal to Magnus the Scots aristocracy.’<sup>55</sup> Indeed, sometime between 1109 and 1114 a man by the name of Ralph Novell was elected and consecrated from York as a rival to Bishop William. It is not known

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<sup>52</sup> Thomson (2008), p. 92.

<sup>53</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 91.

<sup>54</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 91.

<sup>55</sup> Thomson (2008), p. 93.

whether or not Bishop Ralph ever set foot on the islands, although it has been suggested by Thomson that “the reason that Bishop William was so often found in Egilsay was that Ralph Novell was installed in Christchurch”<sup>56</sup> which we know to be the episcopal seat in the islands.

When the day came and the peace between them was to be ratified, Hákon brought eight ships and an army of men dressed as if for war. There could be no mistaking his intentions. Earl Magnus spent the night in the small church on Egilsay praying and in the morning he went to meet with Hákon. It became clear that there was no escaping the situation and that Magnus’ life was indeed forfeit. Hákon gave his standard bearer Ófeigi the order to kill Magnus, but Ófeigi, according to the saga, angrily refused. Hákon then told his cook, Lífólf to carry out the deed. Lífólf, knowing he was in no position to argue, began to weep. Earl Magnus then spoke to Lífólf some words of consolation:

“ ‘This is nothing to weep over,’ said Magnus.  
‘A deed like this can only bring fame to the man  
who carries it out. Show yourself a man of spirit  
and you can have my clothes according to the old  
laws and customs. Don’t be afraid, you’re doing  
this against your will and the man who gives you  
the order is a greater sinner than you are.’ ”<sup>57</sup>

“ ‘Eigi skaltu gráta þetta,’ sagði jarl, “því at frægð  
er í at vinna slíkt. Vertu með staðföstumhug, því  
at þú skalt hafa klæði min, sem siðr er til ok lög  
inna fyrri manna, ok eigi skaltu hræðask, því at þú  
gerir nauðigr, ok sá, er þér nauðgar, misgerir meira  
en þú.’ ”<sup>58</sup>

Earl Magnus then took of his tunic and gave it to Lífólf. After this he fell to his knees and began to pray, committing his soul to God. When he was ready he again spoke to Lífólf:

“Stand in front of me and strike me hard  
on the head...it is not fitting for a chieftain  
to be beheaded like a thief”<sup>59</sup>

“Stattu fyrir mér, ok hogg mik í hofuð  
mikit sár, því at eigi samir at hoggva  
hofðingja sem þjófa.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Thomson (2008), p. 95.

<sup>57</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 95.

<sup>58</sup> Guðmundsson (1965), p. 110.

<sup>59</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 94.

<sup>60</sup> Guðmundsson (1965), p. 111.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly when these events took place. The saga account is somewhat problematic because it contradicts itself:

“Earl Magnus died two days after St Tiburtius’ Mass, and had been joint ruler of Orkney with Hakon for seven years. Since the death of King Olaf, seventy-four years had gone by, and the rulers of Norway at the time were Kings Sigurd, Eystein and Olaf. It was 1091 years after the birth of Christ.”<sup>61</sup>

“Andlátsdagr Magnúss jarls er tveim náttum eptir Tíbúrcíúsmessu. Þá hafði hann jarl verit yfir Orkneyjum sjau vetr ok þeir Hákon báðir saman. Þá var liðit frá falli Óláfs konungs fjórir vetr ins átta tiger; þá váru konungar yfir Nóregi Sigurðr ok Eysteinn ok Ólafr; þá var liðit frá burði Krists þúsund ok níu tiger ok einn vetr.”<sup>62</sup>

The date of Magnus’ death is said to have been two days after Tiburtius’ Mass which is celebrated on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April. Magnus’ death day is therefore thought to have been April 16<sup>th</sup>, a date which is generally accepted among Magnus scholars today. The year, however, is slightly more problematic. The saga account does supply a sufficient amount of clues as to pinpoint the exact year. The saga is somewhat ambivalent and at places unclear or even mistaken in its relation of Earl Magnus’ death. First, we must look at the line in the saga that reads “Since the death of King Olaf seventy-four years had gone by, and the rulers of Norway at the time were Kings Sigurd, Eystein and Olav.” King Olav Haraldsson, the saint, died in 1030 and *seventy-four years later* gives us the year 1104, not 1091 as the saga states. Furthermore the saga says that Magnus had been “joint ruler of Orkney with Hákon for seven years.” King Magnus Bare-legs was killed in Ulster in 1102 or 1103 depending on who you consult,<sup>63</sup> and it was his sons, Sigurd, Eystein and Olav, that granted Hákon Pálsson the title of Earl “A year or two”<sup>64</sup> after their father’s death, something that will give us an approximate year of 1104. Shortly after this, Magnus is also bestowed with the title of earl by the Kings in Norway and claims his half of the islands next to Hákon. If then, another seven years was to pass before that fatal day on Egilsay, the year would have been approximately 1111.

The meeting is said to have been held “After the celebration of Easter”, and if this is true, says Orcadian writer and journalist Sigurd Towrie, the only possible date that matches is

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<sup>61</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), pp. 95-96.

<sup>62</sup> Guðmundsson (1965), p. 111.

<sup>63</sup> Thomson (2008) p. 92 or Muir, Tom: *Orkney in the Saga – The Story of the Earldom of Orkney as told in the Icelandic Sagas*. Kirkwall: The Orcadian Limited, 2005, p. 62.

<sup>64</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 88.

the year 1118.<sup>65</sup> This becomes clear, as shown by Gregor Lamb, in his article in *The Orcadian* from 2004,<sup>66</sup> however, Orkney scholars disagree on the subject. Thomson believes it to have taken place in 1115<sup>67</sup>, Clouston and Holtsmark in 1116<sup>68</sup> whereas both Marwick and Jesch believe it to be 1117<sup>69</sup> although none of these years match the date of Easter according to the Julian calendar, which was in use in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. 1118 however, does match the calendar, Tiburtius Mass and Easter Sunday coinciding on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April. Thus, the following Tuesday was the 16<sup>th</sup> of April – the day recognised as the day of Magnus’ death. It therefore seems that it is Mr. Towrie that has the final word, if the dates are correct, in assuming that Magnus was slain in the year 1118.

After Magnus was slain, Hákon had all Magnus’ followers swear allegiance to him and took control of the islands as sole ruler. Magnus was laid to rest at the church his grandfather, Thorfinn the Mighty, had built at Birsay. Hákon embarked on a pilgrimage to Rome and from there on to Jerusalem before returning to the islands. It is said that Earl Hákon was a good earl, much loved by all and that the islands experienced a period of prosperity and peace under his rule, and when he died he was mourned throughout the islands. The accepted year for Hákon’s death is, according to Clouston, 1123 and he was certainly dead by 1125.<sup>70</sup> After Hákon his son, Paul took the title as Earl of Orkney.

#### **4.1. Magnus Erlendsson - the saint**

From the *Orkneyinga Saga* we hear how there is said to have been a bright heavenly light surrounding Magnus’ grave and a heavenly fragrance coming from it.<sup>71</sup> Many who prayed to Earl Magnus and kept vigil by his tomb are said to have had their prayers answered and as word of his saintliness started to spread, people soon started flocking to his final resting place. Bishop William was cool in his response to the rumours and, according to the saga account, “called it sheer heresy to spread them around.”<sup>72</sup> Perhaps this may be another sign that Williams’ allegiance at first lay with Earl Hákon?

After a visit to Norway, Bishop William was caught in a fierce storm on his way back to Orkney. Just off the coast of Shetland the weather got so bad there was a danger that the

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<sup>65</sup> <http://www.orkneyjar.com/history/stmagnus/magnus6.htm>

<sup>66</sup> Lamb, Gregor: ‘Attempting to establish exactly when Earl Magnus was killed’ in: *The Orcadian*, September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2004, p. 8.

<sup>67</sup> Thomson (1987), p. 58.

<sup>68</sup> Clouston (1932), p. 72 and Holtsmark (1970), p. 8.

<sup>69</sup> Marwick, Hugh: *Orkney*. London: Robert Hale Limited, 1951, p. 56 and Jesch (2005), p. 14.

<sup>70</sup> Clouston (1932), p. 72.

<sup>71</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 96.

<sup>72</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 102.

ship would go down with all of her crew. The bishop, taking the advice of the ship's captain, swore that if they got favourable weather he would no longer oppose the translation of Earl Magnus' relics. The sea is said to have calmed quickly and a favourable wind blew them all safely home. The bishop however, failed to keep his promise. Whether this was out of disbelief or out of fear for reprimand by Earl Paul the saga says nothing about, but it makes it clear that all talk of the saintliness of Earl Magnus abominated the earl.<sup>73</sup> It seems plausible that William, wanting to stay on the best of terms with the earl, took his side in the matter.

One day, when William was praying in Christ church at Birsay he was suddenly struck with blindness. Seized with a great terror he found his way to Magnus' tomb. He wept and promised before the grave of Earl Magnus to 'have the relics lifted whatever Earl Paul might say.'<sup>74</sup> The bishop shortly thereafter had his sight restored and from that point forward he recognised Magnus as a saint. Bishop William had Magnus' bones exhumed, washed and placed in a shrine above the altar in Christ church at Birsay. At this point, says the saga, Earl Magnus had been dead for 21 years.

The Orkneyinga Saga relates how Earl Magnus in a dream appeared before a farmer from the island of Westray. The earl had a message he wanted the farmer to convey to the bishop:

"Tell Bishop William that I want to leave Birsay and go east to Kirkwall. [...] 'I believe that in his mercy Almighty God will grant me this, that the sick will be cured of their ills if they go there with true faith. When you describe this dream, speak out boldly.'<sup>75</sup>

"þat skaltu segja Vilhjálmi byskupi, at ek vil á brot fara ór Byrgisheraði ok austrí Kirkjuvág, ok true ek því, at almáttigr guð mun þat veita mér af sinni miskunn, at þeir men verði heilir meina sinna, er þangat sækja vanheilir með rétttri trú. Þenna draum skaltu djarfliga segja."<sup>76</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 103.

<sup>74</sup> Cruden (1977), p. 86.

<sup>75</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 104.

<sup>76</sup> Guðmundsson (1965), p. 124.

When the farmer felt reluctant to go and see the bishop, Magnus appeared once again to the man, and this time he was furious, saying that if he did not go, the farmer would be severely punished in this life and even more so in the next.<sup>77</sup> The farmer then went to attend Mass at Birsay and there, in front of the entire congregation and Earl Paul, spoke of his dream. It is said that men now besought the bishop to take the relics east to Kirkwall as Earl Magnus had wished, while Earl Paul kept silent “as if he had a mouth full of water and flushed deep red.”<sup>78</sup> It has been thought by some that this reference to Earl Paul’s reaction may be an eye witness account, due to its graphic nature.<sup>79</sup> Shortly after, the saga says, the bishop led a grand procession from Birsay to Kirkwall, where the shrine was set over the altar of the church “that stood there at that time.”<sup>80</sup> This church is usually thought to have been St. Olaf’s church, even though “there is no direct evidence for the name or location of the church in the text” writes Jesch and Molleson.<sup>81</sup>

The most important elements from the saga according to my research problem will be the death of Earl Magnus, Ragnvalds vow and the subsequent transfer of power and the founding and constructing of the cathedral. And what this meant for the church in Orkney? There are many dangers in manoeuvring this potential, literary minefield and an ever watchful eye is of the utmost importance.

#### **4.2. The relics of St. Magnus**

After being slain, Magnus’ body was brought back by his mother Thora by permission of Earl Hákon, now sole rule of the islands. He was laid to rest in his grandfather’s Christ Church on Birsay where the saga says his body lay buried for 21 years before Bishop William ‘admitted his sanctity’<sup>82</sup>, papal recognition not yet being needed. Shortly thereafter, his remains were removed to Kirkwall where they were “set over the altar in the church that stood there.” This is, as we have seen, believed to have been a church dedicated to the martyred Norwegian King Olav that has long since vanished – the only remaining part of which is now an arch, removed from its original position and today serving as a garden gate.<sup>83</sup> It has been assumed that his shrine would be placed over the high altar in the new cathedral as soon as it was consecrated. It is further assumed that the consecration must have taken place in 1152/3,

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<sup>77</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 104.

<sup>78</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 105.

<sup>79</sup> Cruden (1977), p. 87.

<sup>80</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 105.

<sup>81</sup> Jesch & Molleson (2005), p. 132.

<sup>82</sup> Cruden (1977), p. 87.

<sup>83</sup> Gibson (2005), p. 74.

before Earl Ragnvald and the highest leader of the Orkney church, Bishop William, set out on their pilgrimage to the Holy Land.<sup>84</sup> In The Orkneyinga Saga we can read how Earl Ragnvald is encouraged by his father, Kol, to seek the help of Earl Magnus, Ragnvald's uncle, in winning the earldom. Within Catholic faith, the power of relics is not to be taken lightly and, as Cruden shows, "They influenced the very design of churches, and the influential part they played in the founding and building of St. Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall is of significance in the interpretation of its architecture."<sup>85</sup>

The Orkneyinga Saga is rich in compliments about Magnus and has a whole chapter dedicated to his virtues. This praise is a typical trait of a hagiographical literature and probably has its origin in the Latin *Legenda*. However, the only physical traits we can find in the saga is that he was a tall man "with a fine, intelligent look about him"<sup>86</sup>, although exactly how tall he was the saga does not say.<sup>87</sup>

During restoration work on Kirkwall cathedral in 1848 a set of bones were uncovered from a cavity in the third pier from the crossing in the north aisle of the choir. These bones were thought by many to have been the remains of St. Magnus.<sup>88</sup> When in March 1919, however, a second set of bones, encased in an oak chest, were discovered in a cavity in a corresponding pier in the south aisle, opinions shifted.<sup>89</sup> The second set of bones includes a skull with massive fractures on the top part. The two sets of bones were in 1925 examined by R. W. Reid, M.D. and Professor of Anatomy at the University of Aberdeen. Dr. Reid concluded, after thorough inspection that the fractures on the skull are consistent with what the Orkneyinga Saga tells of the murder of Earl Magnus. "The investigation on the whole confirmed the conclusion that the human remains which were contained in a wooden case in the south pillar belonged to Saint Magnus and that those which were found in a cavity in the north pillar belonged in all probability to Saint Rognvald"<sup>90</sup> writes dr. Reid in the conclusion of his examination report.

Both dr. Reid and John Mooney imagined that the bones of the two men were put into the cavities of the pillars at the time when the choir was extended to the east, yet in more

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<sup>84</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 141.

<sup>85</sup> Cruden (1977), p. 86.

<sup>86</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), pp. 89 .

<sup>87</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), pp. 89 - 90.

<sup>88</sup> Mooney, John: 'Notes on Discoveries in St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall' in: *Proceedings of the Orkney Antiquarian Society*, May 1925, p. 245.

<sup>89</sup> Mooney (1925), p. 239.

<sup>90</sup> Reid, R. W.: 'Remains of Saint Magnus and Saint Rognvald, Entombed in Saint Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Orkney' in: *Biometrika*, vol. 18 no. 1/2. Biometrika Trust, 1926, p. 146.



recent years it has been suggested that the bones were inserted into the cavities in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, right around the time of the Reformation.<sup>91</sup>



The last historical references to the relics of St. Magnus are found in the saga of Hákon Hákonsson. Upon returning from the battle of Largs in 1263, fierce winter storms were raging in the North Sea and the King and his men were to spend the winter in Orkney, not venturing an open sea crossing in the

fierce storms. During winter the king fell ill and deteriorated quickly. As a last attempt at getting better he walked from his sickbed in the bishop's palace to the cathedral and there he walked around the shrine of St. Magnus, hoping that the saint would cure him of his illness. He did not, and the king died just after midnight on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December.<sup>92</sup> King Hákon was laid to rest in the cathedral before the shrine of St. Magnus. The following spring the casket with the king was "solemnly lifted and carried to his flagship in Scapa Flow and sailed back to Bergen for final burial in Christ Church there, a symbolic departure of the Norse power west over-seas" writes Stewart Cruden.<sup>93</sup> A marble slab marks the place King Hákon was first laid to rest.

#### **4.3. Pilgrimage to Kirkwall**

The veneration of St. Magnus quickly spread throughout Orkney and Shetland. Word of the saint soon spread across the sea to the Faroe Islands where another cathedral was consecrated to him although never finished.<sup>94</sup> And in Iceland he became the patron saint of at least ten churches.<sup>95</sup> The veneration of saints and the cult of relics is an important

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<sup>91</sup> Jesch & Molleson (2005), p.127.

<sup>92</sup> Cruden (1986), p. 125.

<sup>93</sup> Cruden (1986), p. 126.

<sup>94</sup> Cruden (1977), p. 95.

<sup>95</sup> Foote, Peter: 'Observations on Orkneyinga Saga' in: Crawford, 1988, p. 202.

part of the catholic faith, today as it was in the Middle Ages. The cult of relics also played an influential part in the founding and building of Kirkwall cathedral and is significant in the interpretation of its architecture. It seems reasonable to think that, as word of Orkney's martyred Earl spread, possibly along with Master Roberts lost Vita and the writings that were to become the Orkneyinga Saga, pilgrims would start to convene on Kirkwall to offer their prayers at his shrine - Orkney being easily accessible from anywhere in the North Atlantic, Anglo/Scandinavian world. The new cathedral at Kirkwall had to be designed in such a way as to accommodate the rising number of pilgrims that came to see the shrine of the Holy Earl Magnus. So "numerous being the throng of pilgrims that normal services were severely interrupted and special arrangements had to be made." writes Macrae in the Foreword to *Light in the North – St. Magnus Cathedral through the Centuries*.<sup>96</sup>

The Orkneyinga Saga tells of wonderful happenings at the grave of the late Earl. So many in fact, that the full length of chapter 57 is devoted solely to the wonderful things that happened at his tomb – first at Birsay and later at Kirkwall.<sup>97</sup> Also, when the narrative tells of the translation of the relics to Kirkwall, it states that "In those days the market town of Kirkwall had only a few houses."<sup>98</sup> It may well be that the saga writer, by this rather inconsequential note wants to put focus on how much Kirkwall had grown in the last century or so, possibly – and in my opinion quite probably, thanks to the rise in pilgrims that came to town. Along with the pilgrims would also come merchants, priests, inns, taverns and hotels and all the facilities that would be needed to accommodate the rising number of visitors. Kirkwall also has the first recorded pub in Scotland.<sup>99</sup> And with all this new business came money. Perhaps Earl Ragnvalds sale of the farmer's odal rights back to them (which will be discussed more thoroughly later on) was not the only kind of income that helped drive the construction of the cathedral forward. The Orkneyinga Saga tells of a man in England who had lost a great deal of money on gambling. He prayed to Earl Magnus not to lose all his possessions and instead he won it all back.<sup>100</sup> Later he is said to have given a great deal of money to Earl Magnus - a pointer to how the pilgrimage business was big business and may well have given a substantial influx of money in Kirkwall's coffers and helped the town grow and prosper. Miracles at Magnus' tomb were recorded first at Birsay, then later on, in the

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<sup>96</sup> Macrae, R. A. A. S.: 'Foreword' in: Cant, H. W. M. & H. N. Firth: *Light in the North – St. Magnus Cathedral through the Centuries*. Kirkwall: The Orkney Press, 1989, p. 1.

<sup>97</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 103.

<sup>98</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 105. Guðmundssons (1965), p. 125 reads: "Kaupstaðrinn var lítt húsaðr í þann tíma í Kirkjuvági."

<sup>99</sup> Gibson (2005), p. 74.

<sup>100</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 107.

small church of St. Olav.<sup>101</sup> With these kinds of miracles taking place it is not unlikely that even before the cathedral was ready to accept its saint, pilgrims would have come to pay tribute and offer their prayers.

After the death of Earl Ragnvald Ragnvald in Scotland in 1158 his body was brought back to Orkney and buried in the cathedral. There the Lord worked several “wondrous miracles”, the saga says<sup>102</sup>, and Bishop Bjarni, with the Pope’s permission had his Holy relics translated. This, according to the saga account was in in 1192.

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<sup>101</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 105.

<sup>102</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 214.



PART III  
Kirkwall Cathedral



## 5. Architectural Aspects of St. Magnus Cathedral

The cathedral of St. Magnus is without doubt the finest surviving monument to the Norse dominion in the Orkneys. There are however few records of its construction. There are no drawings, sketches or blueprints for us to study. Nor are there any employment contracts or receipts for purchase of material. There is, virtually, nothing but the stones of the building itself to tell the tale of its conception and construction.<sup>103</sup> True as this may be, it has not stopped scholars in the fields of history, art and architecture, as well as others I am sure, from examining the building over the years, and there are plenty of ideas and theories surrounding the edifice and its construction.

In this part of the thesis I intend to give a thorough description of the building's interior and exterior as it appears today, as well as a chronology of its construction.

### 5.1. Measurements:

(According to Architect Johan Meyer in the *Monumenta Orcadica*<sup>104</sup>)

Length of nave being.....	55,0 metres.
Breadth of transepts with tower piers.....	31,5 metres.
Length of choir.....	14,0 metres.
Breadth from wall to wall of the aisles.....	13,7 metres.
Breadth of nave proper, also of transepts.....	5,2 metres.
Combined length of north and south transepts.....	27,5 metres.
Height of original walls of nave.....	about 14,5 metres.
Thickness of the earliest aisle-walls & their eastward extension.....	0,87 metres.
Thickness of the other walls.....	about 1,5 metres.
The length of the subsequent eastward extension of the choir is about 10,5 metres.	

The exterior presents a general history of the cathedral and some of the changes that have taken place, with its different styles, colours, stones, shapes and layers. Built from red and white sandstone, it is placed on gently sloping ground in the middle of Kirkwall city centre. Although the Royal Burgh of Kirkwall has changed drastically over the years, the

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<sup>103</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 140.

<sup>104</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 58. English version.

building itself has not been much altered since it was presented to the ‘magistrates, councillors and inhabitants of Kirkwall’ by King James III of Scotland in 1486.<sup>105</sup>

## 5.2. Floor plan, building material and elevation

“There are two ways of describing a building which comprises various dates” writes Henry Dryden. “One is to give an exact account of its parts in order of place - the other to give account of it in order of construction”<sup>106</sup> In the following I will do both, as I believe the one says something about the other and as such, they are equally important. By doing so, I hope to present a coherent and vivid image of Kirkwall cathedral.

The St. Magnus Cathedral is a three aisled, cross-church style, basilica. It is laid out in the traditional Christian east/west fashion, sloping, as mentioned, slightly from the south-east to the north-west.<sup>107</sup> In fact, one of the cathedral custodians told me that she had, during a quiet winter hour, tried placing a tennis ball at the east end of the nave and it had, according to her, rolled effortlessly towards the western part of the edifice.

The building is constructed from local red and white Orkney sandstone, believed to hail primarily from quarries at the Head of Holland near Kirkwall, as well as from Eday, one of the islands in the northern part of the Orkneys.<sup>108</sup> It is mainly built within the Norman-Romanesque style, yet with clear evidence of being completed far into the Gothic period.<sup>109</sup> There has, in earlier times, been a slight debate about whether or not the architectural terms commonly used in England could be applied in Scotland. Dryden did not seem to think so. He therefore discards all earlier terminology and rather divides the styles used in the cathedral into five different stages.<sup>110</sup> Architects MacGibbon & Ross however, write that “it is astonishing to find how closely the earlier parts correspond with the architecture of Normandy” and believe that with “some allowances, the same general stages of progress can be observed in St. Magnus’ as in the South.”<sup>111</sup>

The east end of the cathedral is terminated by a flat wall with large lancet windows and a giant rose on top. The choir consists of six bays, the nave of eight - both are aisled. The transept does not have aisles and so it presents a break in the floor plan of the building. In the northern and southern transepts there are two, small eastward projecting chapels, one in each

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<sup>105</sup> Mooney, John (1947), p. 3.

<sup>106</sup> Dryden, Henry E. L. (1878), p. 24.

<sup>107</sup> Dryden, Henry E. L. (1878), p. 24.

<sup>108</sup> Dryden (1878), p. 51.

<sup>109</sup> Innes, Cosmo: *Scotland in the Middle Ages*. Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1860, p. 295.

<sup>110</sup> Dryden, Henry E. L. (1878), p. 22.

<sup>111</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 273.



transept arm. Above ground level the cathedral has a triforium with semi-circular arches and above this a clerestory. The clerestory windows have both semi-circular arches and gothic style pointed arches. Over the central crossing rises the square, gothic style tower with a green, copper spire topped off by a small cross.

It is believed that St. Magnus cathedral was supposed to be, and to a certain extent is, a scale model of the cathedral at Durham. Architectural scholars seem to agree that the building is skilfully designed to give the visitor a feeling of great size and spaciousness, when in fact it measures only 55 metres in the nave times 31,5 metres in the transept.<sup>112</sup> The “appearance of great size has often been remarked of St. Magnus’, and, no doubt, arises from the height and length of the edifice as compared with its width...”<sup>113</sup> wrote MacGibbon & Ross towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hossack supplements the two architects by noting that “In the nave the height to the vaulting is seventy-one feet, while the width between the pillars is less than seventeen.”<sup>114</sup> “In its original form, Kirkwall was only about half the size of Durham cathedral and the masons “have been able to convey a sense of scale out of all proportion with real size.”<sup>115</sup>

This idea of scale and perspective still holds true to this day as Eric Cambridge mentions how ‘the central vessel at Kirkwall is higher than normal compared to its width’.<sup>116</sup> The scale at Kirkwall is, according to Cambridge, 1: 2,7 whereas the scale in Durham, which is believed to have acted as a model for the cathedral at Kirkwall, is 1: 2,3. This together with the inserted ceiling vaults, Cambridge claims, “produce a misleading impression of the actual proportions.”<sup>117</sup> The somewhat faulty sense of grandeur is, says Dietrichson & Meyer, also brought on account of the church’s humble surroundings. This is still true to this day, although the town has grown quite a bit over the last 111 years or so that have passed since Dietrichson & Meyer visited the islands, there is still space enough around the cathedral to give it a sense of majesty.

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<sup>112</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 58. English version, and Fawcett, Richard ‘Kirkwall Cathedral: An Architectural Analysis’ in: Crawford (1988), p. 88.

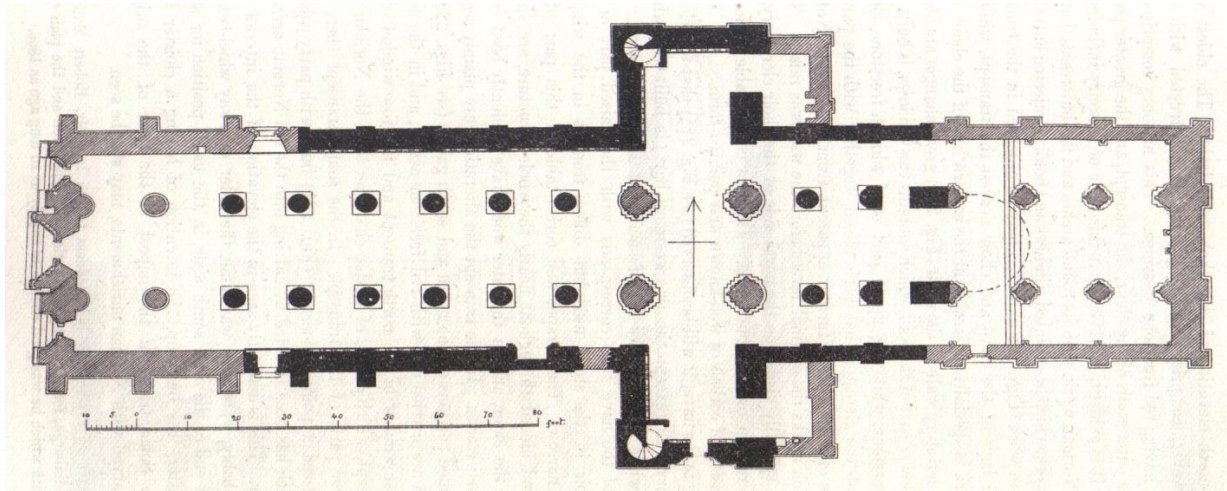
<sup>113</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 259.

<sup>114</sup> Hossack, B. H.: *Kirkwall in the Orkneys*. Kirkwall: William Peace & son, 1900, p. 30.

<sup>115</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 88.

<sup>116</sup> Cambridge, Eric: ‘The Architectural Context of the Romanesque Cathedral at Kirkwall’ in: Crawford (1988), p. 113.

<sup>117</sup> Cambridge in Crawford (1988), p. 114.



Ground plan taken from MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 261.

### 5.3. Exterior

Today, the town of Kirkwall is not a large one, counting only some 7000 souls. Its streets are narrow, its houses are small and the cathedral can be seen towering over the city from just about anywhere. Even though the town of Kirkwall has grown much bigger than its Viking age beginnings, there is still nothing else around that compares to the cathedral dedicated to St. Magnus. The first thing one will notice upon approaching the cathedral from the small square in front of the western end - the so called Kirk Green - is the three magnificent doorways. With their pointed arches and their interchanging pattern of red and white sandstone, they have been said to recall “the portals of the cathedrals of France rather than those of England.”<sup>118</sup> It is easy for the mind to wander off to places like San Vitale in Ravenna, the cathedral in Orvieto or even to Charlemagne’s palatine chapel at Aachen. We know that several features of Carolingian architecture was adopted into English architecture during the tenth century monastic revival in England, especially in cathedrals such as Canterbury and Durham with their massive westworks.<sup>119</sup> It is easy to imagine that this continental inspiration mixed with local building traditions and found its way from Durham to Kirkwall possibly via Dunfermline, as we shall see. In addition we know that the initial plan was to have a set of two towers over the aisles on the west front<sup>120</sup>, another typical Carolingian feature in ecclesiastical architecture. This feature is also found at Durham and Dunfermline has an even sturdier westwork. This idea however, was at some point abandoned.

<sup>118</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 259.

<sup>119</sup> Watkin, David: *A History of Western Architecture*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2005, p. 113.

<sup>120</sup> Burgher, Leslie: *Orkney: An Illustrated Architectural Guide*. Edinburgh: Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, 1991, p. 10.

The use of alternating and interchanging colour has invested the building with an almost eastern splendour. As well as being a decorative element, the doorways also give a clear indication of the cathedral's internal tripartite division, with nave and aisles. This part of the building belongs to the final stages of its construction. The central doorway is roughly about twice the size of the aisle doors, its pointed arch embedded in a protruding triangular gable, pointing upwards at a sharp angle. On the upper part of the gable can be seen a coat of arms. MacGibbon & Ross identified it as a product of the seventeenth century, belonging to a Mr. George Hay of Kinfaus who rented lands from the Bishopric.<sup>121</sup> In more modern times however, this has been contested and it has recently been suggested that it be that of Bishop Andrew Pictoris who held the See of Orkney between 1477 and approximately 1506.<sup>122</sup> The gable points upwards toward a large stained glass lancet window with intersecting pointed arch tracery. Above this window, between the gables, is a small pointed arch window on an otherwise flat and undecorated wall. At the apex of the roof there is a small, stone cross. These crosses also appear on the apexes of the northern, eastern and southern parts of the roof.

The central doorway has ten retracting jambs on each side, of which the three outermost ones on both sides form a cluster around a pier. These, it seem, were intended to carry free shafted pinnacles, though this was never completed. The seven jambs closest to the door are topped off with ornate capitals that support the concentric pointed arches projecting upward in alternating red and white colour. The red stone arches have decorated billet moulding whereas the white is decorated with a chevron pattern. The side aisle doors to the north and south of the main doorway have the same retracting jambs, but here there are only three on each door. The northern doorway, has, like the central one, concentric pointed arches radiating outwards, but the colours are opposite of those on the central one and there are no decorations except from on the outermost of the arches which is decorated with a chevron pattern. The southern doorway has the most advanced type of geometric pattern. The red and white colours of the stone radiate and alternate outward with several variations on the chevron pattern present. Unfortunately the doorways are much worn through the centuries. Even so it is easy to nod in agreement with what MacGibbon & Ross wrote more than a hundred years ago: "Notwithstanding the damage they have sustained, these doorways are still amongst the

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<sup>121</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 288.

<sup>122</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 109.

most charming portions of the edifice...<sup>123</sup> and “probably the finest examples in Great Britain of the use of coloured stones in construction.”<sup>124</sup>



The western front of the building as it appears today is undeniably one of its defining and most wonderful features. It is also a far stretch from how it was originally thought to look and its date is by Dietrichson & Meyer estimated to around 1250.<sup>125</sup> The front of the cathedral is divided into three sections by four westward facing buttresses. In between the doorways the buttresses are “carried up in alternate red and yellow courses.”<sup>126</sup> The far northern and southern buttresses on the western front terminate above the roof in pointed turrets standing clear of the building itself. They add a sense of both vertical movement and height to the building. These turrets are another recurring theme on all the extrovert corners of the building.

If one turns the northern corner and starts moving around the edifice another doorway will immediately come into view. It is situated on the wall of the third arcade, between two very different types of buttresses. The three buttresses to the west of the small doorway are heavy, protruding ones with water tables in three stages terminating in a base course that runs all around the building. The buttresses to the east are of the same type as the ones on the front of the cathedral. They rise only slightly from the flat wall and are found throughout the oldest

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<sup>123</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 288.

<sup>124</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 284.

<sup>125</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 162.

<sup>126</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 288.

parts of the building. The little doorway has three rows of jambs on each side and is topped off by a semi-circular arch with the same concentric rings that are found on the doorways on the western front. The same type of gable as found above the central western doorway is also found on this smaller door, although it is somewhat more ornate than the one on the front. The three westernmost bays are made up from a different type of stone. The stones are large, clean cut, brick sized stones. There are two narrow, pointed arch aisle windows found in the two westernmost bays. On the eastern side of the door the stone is much more slaty and the windows are larger Norman style ones with semi-circular arches.<sup>127</sup>

Above the aisle windows in the entire length of the nave we again find the clear cut ashlar type masonry. Where it meets the lower type of stone is a row of corbels in the shape of inverted fleur-de-lis. This feature runs along the entire length of the central vessel though not on the walls of the transept arms. We do, however, see the pattern on the north and south side walls of the transept chapels. This is where the aisle walls were raised sometime during the long construction period and the row of corbels mark the transition from the older, lower part to the newer, upper part of the aisles.

On clerestory level there is a dramatic break before the three westernmost bays. The type of stone used changes suddenly from red sandstone towards the west whereas the remaining eastern part of the clerestory is made up from whitish sandstone. This is all from when the nave was expanded westwards an additional three bays.

The transept on the northern side of the building has four levels of windows, in which the bottom two, the ground level and triforium level, have semi-circular, Norman style arches. The clerestory level has a double set of windows next to each other. Where the angle of the roof begins there are twin turrets like at the western front spiring upwards, and there is a circular window in between the gables of the roof.

Moving from the transept towards the eastern end of the edifice one will notice a corbel table with grotesque heads on the triforium level. This, like the fleur-de-lis' of the nave, marks the original level of the roof. The three easternmost bays are defined by the same type of protruding buttresses with water tables as were seen to the far west of the nave. These three bays also have pointed arch windows and mark the extension of the older, original choir. The two westernmost bays, the third being blocked by the projecting chapel of the transept, have flat, Norman style buttresses. The windows in the three westernmost bays of the choir have semi-circular arches with billet moulding. The aisle walls of the choir have been raised,

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<sup>127</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 273.

the old parapet being left where it was and a new one constructed above it. On clerestory level the walls have also been raised. Red stone and a row of corbel heads mark the level of the old wall, whereas the higher new wall has been constructed from the lighter white sandstone with a new parapet above.

The eastern end of the cathedral is dominated by the great rose windows. In each of the aisles there is a pointed arch window. On the triforium level are found small pointed arch windows as well, one on each side of the nave. The great eastern window fills the entire wall in the shape of a large, pointed arch. The top of the arch is filled with a large, circular, rose window measuring 5 metres in diameter. Underneath the space is divided in a lancet window with pointed arch tracery measuring 7 metres in height. The eastern wall is buttressed in an identical manner to the western front with the four flat, Norman style buttresses terminating in turrets at roof level.

The south side of the choir, from the transept to the east end, differs somewhat from its northern side counterpart, the most obvious difference being the small door that is found in the fourth bay from the transept. It has twinned columns with small capitals and a pointed arch. Above it is a large round arched lancet window with two lights and pointed arch tracery. There is no row of corbels on the triforium wall and only a few corbel heads remain on the clerestory wall close to the transept. The top of the clerestory is constructed from white ashlar whereas the lower parts are made from the red sandstone. The three easternmost bays are supported by the same protruding buttresses with water tables, as we have seen earlier. Again we see the use of different stones, both ashlar and freestone in the walls of the aisles. The windows are peculiar in that there is no conformity in their design. The two easternmost windows are somewhat small and have pointed arches above. There is the large window above the door and to the west of this is a larger window with a semi-circular arch with billet moulding as could be found on the north side of the choir. The remaining two windows are smaller and very simple in their execution, with semi-circular arches and no decoration at all. The south wall of the choir then, has six windows altogether, made in four different manners of style. The transept wall on the south side also differs from the one on the northern side of the building. On the ground floor there is a beautifully, decorated door, much resembling the ones that are found on the western front of the building. It has the same interchanging red and white sandstone, only the pattern on the south transept doorway is arranged in a chequerwise fashion. It consists of four orders of jambs with waterleaf capitals. The pointed arch mouldings have a dog-tooth pattern on the second and fourth orders. There is a Norman style window, with a semi-circular arch in three orders just above the door and yet another window



in the same fashion on the triforium level. Above these, on the clerestory level is another,



large rose window and above this, between the gables, is a circular window. The top corners of the transept walls are, like the other protruding corners of the building topped off with turrets.

As on the northern side, the aisle walls have been raised, but here the parapet was removed and the wall heightened with red ashlar before constructing a new parapet in a higher position. MacGibbon and Ross states that although “the parapets of the nave and choir are on the same level on the exterior, the vaulting of the nave is several feet lower than the choir.”<sup>128</sup> On the clerestory level white ashlar has been used towards the transept but, like on the north side, we also here find the dramatic change to red ashlar in the three westernmost bays. The southern aisle wall also has an array of different style windows. Closest to the transept is a

window with a semi-circular arch in three orders and no special decorations. The next window from the transept has a semi-circular arch window with three orders and billet mouldings. The third window is another semi-circular arch window in three orders, but this one has a dog tooth pattern around the arch. Then follows three, rather plain windows with round arches and a single jamb on each side of the glass. The two westernmost windows of the aisle are small and narrow and identical to the ones on the northern side. In the aisle wall of the nave is another door, placed in the same place as on the northern side, in the third arcade of the exterior in between two buttresses. The door is small and quite simple in its design and differs much from its northern side counterpart. It has only one jamb on each side of the doorway and no decorations or carvings at all.

Above all this is the central tower. The old wooden pyramidal tower was destroyed by lightning in 1671 and was consequently replaced. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century however this was taken down and the pointed, octagonal copper spire we see today was erected. At the apex of

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<sup>128</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 282.

the spire is a cross, also made from copper. Similarly the parapet and pinnacles were replaced following the pattern of the cathedrals of England.<sup>129</sup> The parapet has three, small windows/openings on each side. There are also two gargoyles on each side of the parapet to drain away excess water from the roof. On each of the four sides of the central tower, underneath the parapet are two gothic style, pointed arch lancet windows with retracting jambs. On the west side of the tower is a circular white clock with roman numerals on a dark, angled square background. This is, of course, a fairly modern instalment, dated 1761.

#### **5.4. Interior**

As one enters the cathedral through one of the western doorways, the first view of the interior is impressive. It unfolds in a long and sleek horizontal movement towards the choir and the large windows on the eastern end. The large western window above the doorways gives light to the nave from one end, whereas the large rose window of the choir gives light from the other. Nave and clerestory level windows illuminate the space in between. The inside of the western doorways and responds are constructed with alternate bands of red and yellow stone.

The seven round piers of the nave arcade, with the round arched triforium arcade above, the clerestory and the vaulted ceiling give the visitor an impression great of size and height. The nave, up to the central crossing consists of eight bays, made up of heavy, cylindrical piers supporting plain, semi-circular arches in three orders. The piers are constructed in a soft, red ashlar and notwithstanding their size the red colour softens the impression and adds a certain warmth to the room. Originally the interior would have been whitewashed, but during earlier restoration work the remaining whitewash was removed and only fragments of the original wall coating remains today.

The two easternmost piers of the north side of the nave have octagonal capitals. The same is true for the three easternmost piers on the south side. The remaining piers of the nave have round, moulded capitals. The aisles have groin vaulting, with the locking stone beautifully carved in a flower pattern. The same type of vaulting is found in the nave.

Along the length of the interior walls run an intersecting blind wall arcading carried on twinned shafts with cushion capitals. A decorative element that is easy on the eyes and adds structure to the walls.

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<sup>129</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 143.



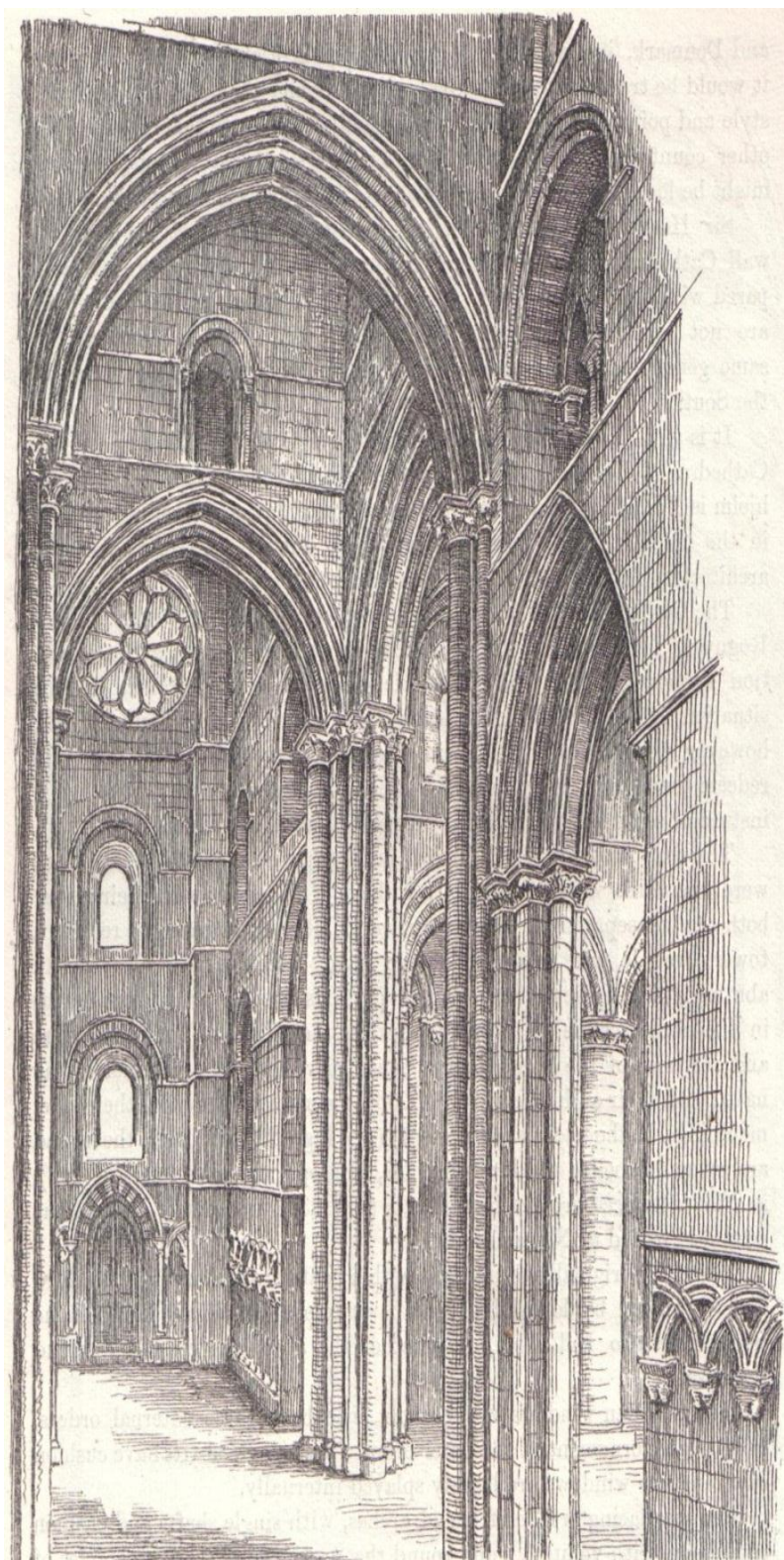


In the aisles' third bay from the west are doorways on the both the northern as well as the southern side. The northern doorway is Norman in detail, but seems to have been restored at a later date. The doorway "in the south aisle retains its old Norman arch and shafts in the interior, but has been altered externally."<sup>130</sup> writes Dietrichson.

Above the nave is a semi-circular arched triforium with gallery and above this is the clerestory with eight small, pointed arch windows –corresponding to the eight bays of the nave. The clerestory of the nave, all except the two westernmost bays is constructed from whitish freestone. The pointed arch opening leading into the central crossing rises high and mighty. Four pillars with clustered shafts with waterleaf capitals and gothic style pointed arches in three orders support the central tower. The apex' of the arches are lifted to the top of the triforium level and open up the church room as well as causing a strong vertical movement in the building. They are all in the transitional style and the openings in the east-west direction are decorated with the Chevron pattern on the innermost order.

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<sup>130</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 276.



Picture taken from MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 274.

In the south transept there is a pointed arch doorway, built with what MacGibbon and Ross refer to as “party coloured stones.”<sup>131</sup> This has been cut from an earlier Norman arcade, of which some traces can still be seen. They go on to describe the door as having “crocket capitals with a ring beneath the abacus in the French manner.”<sup>132</sup> It has been suggested that intentions were to construct a monastery adjacent to the cathedral with an access door at the far eastern end of the southern aisle, but when this idea was abandoned, the transept door was cut from the already existing Norman arcading instead. The idea of having a cloister corresponds with the plans of both Durham and Dunfermline. However, no monastery was ever constructed, probably because of the later financial situation.

On the western wall of the south transept there is carved in deep relief an equalled armed cross of the Maltese type. Local

<sup>131</sup> MacGibbon & Ross p. 262.

<sup>132</sup> Thurlby, Malcolm: ‘Aspects of the architectural history of Kirkwall Cathedral’ in: *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. 127, 1997, p. 868.



Orkney historian and renowned storyteller Tom Muir believes it to be related to the Knights Templar,<sup>133</sup> although there is, as far as I know, no evidence to support this. It may perhaps be a consecration cross, albeit there are other consecration crosses found on the eastern wall of the choir which look very different from this type of cross and are much more elaborately carved as well.



Norwegian Historian Øystein Ekroll has suggested that it may mark a place of burial underneath the stone floor or somehow be related to an act of personal devotion of some kind. Ekroll dismisses the consecration cross theory on that it is carved very asymmetrically into the stone and the fact that there is only one of its kind to be found on the cathedral. As far as the Templar theory goes, Ekroll and I both agree on it being far-fetched. Just because the cross is an equal armed, Maltese cross does not necessarily mean it has any connection with the Templars.<sup>134</sup>

Originally, it is thought that there would have been a chancel screen standing where the transept meets the choir area of the cathedral. The chancel screen was used to separate the clergy from the rest of the people. This was a common feature in medieval churches and is part of MacGibbon & Ross description of the interior of the cathedral as well as appearing in their drawings of the interior. When Dietrichson & Meyer wrote their *Monumenta* however, they made no mention of this screen. Although their book was not published until 1906 the

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<sup>133</sup> Muir, Tom: 'The Stone Carvings' in Callaghan & Wilson, 2001, p. 52.

<sup>134</sup> See appendix

observations rendered were all made during the summer of 1900.<sup>135</sup> This means that sometime during 1896 and 1900 the screen must have been removed. Today a wooden organ screen is placed between the third piers of the choir. Its location does not only identify where the original termination of the choir was, but it also separates the easternmost part, now the St. Ragnvald chapel, from the rest of the room. It is a decorative screen designed by Edinburgh architect George Mackie Watson who was responsible for the restoration works that were carried out in 1919.

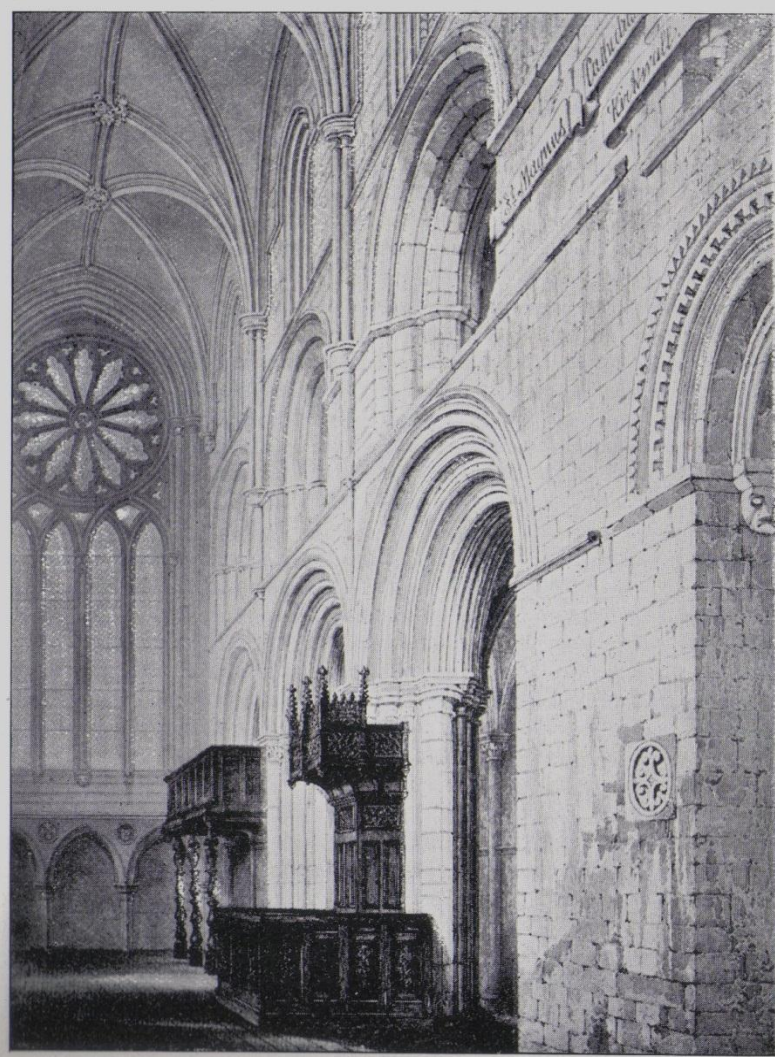
The choir of Kirkwall cathedral is said to be “the finest example of Romanesque work north of Durham”<sup>136</sup> It consists of six bays with aisles, triforium and clerestory. The three westernmost piers of the choir, with their corresponding triforium arches and the clerestory windows are all of a Norman character with of moulding on ground level as well as on both triforium and clerestory level. The three easternmost bays belong in style to the later gothic period, with clustered shafts and pointed arches. On the last of the old Norman/Romanesque piers the old line of mortar where the original choir wall used to be is still visible, marking the junction between new and old. The triforium windows of the eastern part of the choir were made in the style of the older windows with semi – circular arches and jambs in three orders and so the triforium is all in all very uniform in its appearance. On clerestory level the windows have simple, pointed arches at the same level as the Romanesque/Norman windows in the western part of the choir. It is also here at clerestory level that some of the cathedral’s many changes are visible. The lower part of the choir wall with the windows is built with the red, dark ashlar whereas the upper part is in a more whitish type of stone. This shows us that the clerestory was raised and the old level is clearly marked on the outside of the choir with the row of corbel heads on the northern and southern wall, as mentioned earlier.

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<sup>135</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 4.

<sup>136</sup> Cruden in Crawford (1987), p. 79.

On the eastern wall, underneath the great rose window, are three additional wall arcades. These however do not have the same interlace pattern as the wall arcading in the nave and transepts. Rather they are in consecutive order, divided by single shafts with octagonal capitals and gothic style pointed arches. On the spandrels are found four, carved circular ornaments. These are consecration crosses, not to be confused with the equal armed cross found in the south transept wall. Three of the consecration crosses found in the east end are modern replicas but one of the crosses are original. It was removed from its original location on the third pier of the choir during restoration works and placed within one of the



Picture taken from Hossack(1900), p. 43.

spandrels of the eastern end. The picture to the right shows the original position of the cross. Today this area of the choir is known as the St. Ragnvald Chapel and wooden figures of St. Ragnvald, St. Magnus and Bishop William occupy the arcade recesses. Originally it is thought that because of this feature the altar must have stood free from the wall.<sup>137</sup>

It is assumed by many scholars of St. Magnus' that the original choir terminated in a central apse, although no foundation for this has ever been found by archaeologists.

It is believed by many that the choir was originally terminated by a central apse,<sup>138</sup> although there is no surviving evidence from the old foundations or any other archaeological

<sup>137</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 282.

<sup>138</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 273.

or historical evidence for this has been found.<sup>139</sup> Nevertheless, it has been suggested by several scholars - and this to me seems like the most likely alternative - that there was an apse in which the relics of St. Magnus were on display with an ambulatory so as to accommodate the ever growing number of pilgrims arriving at Kirkwall.<sup>140</sup> This, as Cruden remarks (and Thurlby agrees<sup>141</sup>), conforms entirely with the standard layout of the early Christian church when the apse was the place of the Bishops throne, *the cathedra*, as well as with the later medieval development of the cult of relics and the veneration of saints.<sup>142</sup> This would also explain why, at Kirkwall the “eastmost bay of the Romanesque choir, whose arches on north and south spring from massive rectangular piers, is uncommonly narrow, the arches noticeably small and underscaled.”<sup>143</sup> The sudden change in size from the otherwise so strict order of the buildings piers “suggests a passage across the choir between the apse and the reredos of the high altar.”<sup>144</sup> The east end of Durham, which is believed to have been the model for Kirkwall had the shrine of its patron, St. Cuthbert, in this place and pilgrims could gain easy access by way of the aisles. A tall central apse projecting from a flat wall also conforms to the greater churches of Normandy and seems probable also at Kirkwall, concludes Richard Fawcett.<sup>145</sup> This, to Cruden, is evidence of how the cult of relics influenced the architecture of cathedrals. The first, original choir of three bays is thought to have been terminated in a central apse beyond the third pier. Whether the side aisles also had apsidal terminations, continued in an ambulatory around the main apse, or had apsidal chapels on the inside and flat wall terminations on the outside has been a matter of debate for the last 100 years or more. MacGibbon & Ross conclude that it is impossible to say anything for sure, whereas Cruden feels quite safe in stating that the side aisles were indeed terminated with smaller apses.

On the capital of the south western pillar of the presbytery we see a so-called *Sheela-na-gig* figure – a squatting, naked female displaying her genitals. This is a strange and interesting feature to find in the most sacred of spaces. The name, *Sheela-na-gig*, is Celtic and translates into English as “woman of ill repute.”<sup>146</sup> The *Sheela-na-gig* figure is found in several churches throughout the British Isles. Thought to originate in Ireland the symbolic meaning of the *Sheelas* have never fully been understood. “Numerous theories have been

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<sup>139</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 88.

<sup>140</sup> Cruden (1986), p. 124, Fawcett, Thurlby, Dietrichson & Meyer

<sup>141</sup> Thurlby (1997), p. 859.

<sup>142</sup> Cruden (1986), p. 124.

<sup>143</sup> Cruden (1977), p. 91.

<sup>144</sup> *ibid*

<sup>145</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), pp. 88 -89.

<sup>146</sup> Muir in Callaghan & Wilson (2001), p. 60.

proposed about their existence but they still remain a mystery, and their function and purpose is still as much of a controversy as it was back in the Victorian era.”<sup>147</sup> There is only one *Sheela* in Kirkwall cathedral. She is seated on her rump and has a big head with mouth wide open. She is portrayed with her right hand holding her vulva open from above. Her left hand is held up to her head, although there is some debate of whether it is held up against her left ear or if it is covering her left eye.<sup>148</sup>

All through the cathedral one can find different kinds of carved heads. Where the vaulting in the nave springs from the clerestory wall, the ribs rest upon these kinds of heads, usually in sets of three. Some are very natural and mundane in their appearance while others are somewhat grotesque, some are stylized animal heads whereas others seem to be taken out of the wild imagination of a stone carver many years ago.

Kirkwall cathedral also possesses the somewhat odd characteristic of being the only cathedral in the British Isles with a dungeon. The lockup, known as *Marwicks Hole*, is located on the southern wall. A narrow space between the south side transept chapel and the main building has been described as a solitary confinement, without windows or any source of light. A so called ‘bottle dungeon’, large enough to fit one person, standing upright. “Many a time has the cathedral echoed with the screams and imprecations of reluctant women and men on their way, short as it was, to the dreaded Marwick's Hole” writes B.H. Hossack.<sup>149</sup> This ‘hole’ however was no medieval contraption as one might imagine, but rather it seems to have been constructed during the episcopate of Bishop Reid, in the mid sixteenth century.<sup>150</sup>

## 6. The Building History

“The sequence of construction of St. Magnus’s Cathedral at Kirkwall, Orkney, is complex and unusual” writes Professor Malcolm Thurlby and goes on to say that the basic chronology has been established by MacGibbon & Ross.<sup>151</sup> This is true, and architects MacGibbon & Ross indeed makes a very detailed picture of the building process, but as they themselves write “it

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<sup>147</sup> McMahon, Joanne & Jack Roberts: *The Sheela-na-gigs of Ireland and Britain: The Divine Hag of the Christian Celts - An Illustrated Guide*. Dublin: The Mercier Press, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>148</sup> Freitag, Barbara: *Sheela-na-gigs – Unravelling an Enigma*. Oxon/New York City: Routledge, 2004, p. 156. and McMahon & Roberts (2000), p. 169. In their respective descriptions of the Kirkwall *Sheela* Freitag describes her as covering her ear, whereas McMahon & Roberts write that she is covering her eye. I have only one, small picture of the Kirkwall *Sheela* at my disposal from which it is impossible to say with any certainty whether the hand covers the eye or the ear.

<sup>149</sup> Hossack (1900), p. 30.

<sup>150</sup> *ibid*

<sup>151</sup> Thurlby (1997), p. 855.

must be understood that the style is referred to, not the date.<sup>152</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer divides the construction of the cathedral into four time periods, whereas Stewart Cruden separates between building style and building phase and makes it clear that the two are not necessarily connected, and that later reconstruction work may well carry the traits of earlier styles without having to date from the time the particular style was in use.<sup>153</sup> Although the cathedral has an appearance of being an essentially Romanesque building there are several places that have been reconstructed in the Romanesque fashion, both in medieval times as well as later. Both the Romanesque impression as well as the impression of great scale, are misleading. I have already touched upon the scale, but as we shall see, the construction period also goes way past what may be deemed Romanesque. Although the building took a long time to construct, later masons took the work of their predecessors as a guide for their own work and “the end result is a building of remarkable homogeneity” writes Richard Fawcett.<sup>154</sup> This however, also makes distinguishing between the different phases of construction difficult. It is not possible to date when the stone was carved and so it is also a challenge to say whether something is original or whether it is a late medieval reconstruction work.

## **6.1. Phase I**

The Norman/Romanesque period of Earl Ragnvald and Bishop William, from work began in 1137 until the death of Bishop William in 1168, is defined by semi-circular arches and heavy, round piers. It is agreed upon by scholars that when erection of the cathedral began, the choir was the first part of the edifice to be completed. It is here that we today find the oldest parts of the building - the three westernmost bays of the choir along with the central crossing, which was rebuilt at a later stage, and the three easternmost bays of the nave. The design of the internal elevation of the choir, the three storeys, cylindrical piers and rather simple tiering of the arches are all details that place the building within a northern British/Scots context. Parallel work can be found at Carlisle cathedral, Southwell minster and, not least at Dunfermline.<sup>155</sup>

It is agreed upon that the first stage of the construction work was raising the choir, the heart of the building. Exactly how long this would have taken is not known, but scholars agree, and so do I, that it is likely the building was sufficiently advanced to receive the shrine of St. Magnus by the time Earl Ragnvald and Bishop William left on a pilgrimage to the Holy

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<sup>152</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 277.

<sup>153</sup> Cruden (1986), p. 120.

<sup>154</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 88

<sup>155</sup> *ibid*



Land in 1152. Cruden estimates that the initial building process took around 5 years and that the first part of the building was probably done already in or around 1142. It is at least known that the building was in use by 1156.<sup>156</sup>

In the nave, the wall arcading and the cylindrical piers reveal how far the first building campaign progressed. On the south side, the wall arcading has a Romanesque style of carving throughout the first five bays from the crossing. Also in the south aisle the two aisle windows closest to the crossing, as well as the two cylindrical piers of the nave are assumed to be products of the first building campaign. On the north side only four of the wall arcades are completely Romanesque in style and only three and a half aisle windows and the first cylindrical pier of the nave can be said to belong to the first phase works. In the case of the nave piers it is entirely possible that five pairs from the crossing westwards were begun constructed during the initial phase. This can be seen from their bases which are more or less of the same type”<sup>157</sup> In the transepts, the large arches leading into the east chapels were formed originally, but the chapels, it seems, were built later. Hossack estimates that they were constructed in the latter part of the twelfth century. He writes that what characterizes the first building campaign is the semi-circular arches, circular and round pillars and flat buttresses to name a few and that these elements were used in approximately between 1137 and 1160.<sup>158</sup> The intersecting wall arcading also provides a clue as to the extent of the first building campaign.<sup>159</sup>

The anonymous writer of the Orkneyinga Saga praises the speed of the construction work at Kirkwall and writes that

“So rapidly did the building progress that more was done in the first year than in the two or three that followed”<sup>160</sup>

“...fór svá mikit fram verkinu á þeim misserum, at minna gekk á fjórum eða fimm þaðan í frá.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 141.

<sup>157</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 95.

<sup>158</sup> Dryden (1878), p.22.

<sup>159</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 95.

<sup>160</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981) p. 142.

<sup>161</sup> Guðmundsson (1965), p. 174. It seems strange that even though the English translation by Pálsson & Edwards is based on the 1965 Old Norse edition of the saga published by Finnogi Guðmundsson, the English text states that “more was done in the first year than in the two or three that followed” when the Old Norse in the ’65 edition says “fjórum eða fimm”, that is four or five. It may not seem like much of an error, but in our understanding of time and the construction of the cathedral the saga is our only written source and so time is of

The time span in the different editions of the saga is somewhat off. It is curious that in the English translation it says ‘two or three’ whereas the Old Norse version says ‘four or five’ (fjórum eða fimm), even though the English translation is based on the Old Norse text. Nevertheless, the saga writer’s point remains the same: construction progressed rapidly. Although this may be true, it has been suggested by Cruden that “praise of a good start was probably a literary convention” and that this passage of the saga may very well be compared to other accounts pertaining to the erection of other cathedrals in the British Isles - such as when the medieval historian William of Malmesbury wrote of the erection of Canterbury cathedral and praised the speed at which the work progressed there. Cruden goes on to add that it indicates a real possibility that “initial impetus could raise the choir of a church a great deal faster than the average building progress of other parts” in order to take the building into use.<sup>162</sup> Indeed it seems to me only reasonable that, after moving the relics of St. Magnus to Kirkwall and having to store them in a church dedicated to another saint, one would wish for the cathedral to be up and running, so to speak, as quickly as possible.

MacGibbon and Ross write that “the building was designed and superintended by the Norwegian Kol, the father of Ragnvald, who had the principal oversight of the whole work.”<sup>163</sup> However, as Lorentz Dietrichson points out, this is not true to what the Orkneyinga Saga tells us.<sup>164</sup> The saga reads:

Kol was principal supervisor of the construction and had the most say in it.<sup>165</sup>

Kolr var þar mestr tilannaðmaðr smíðarinnar ok hafði mest forsögn á”.<sup>166</sup>

There is nothing in the saga that tells us that Ragnvalds father, Kol, had anything to do with the design of the building. It is highly unlikely that a farmer from southern Norway, although a man of wealth and somewhat importance, had the necessary skills to take on such a formidable task. It seems more likely that he would have acted as the earl’s representative at the construction site. If he supervised the construction, he would have done so according to plans drawn out by a master mason or architect. The master architect would be the one with

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the essence, so to speak, and there is a significant difference between two years of construction work as opposed to five.

<sup>162</sup> Cruden in Crawford (1988), p. 79.

<sup>163</sup> MacGibbon & Ross 1896, p. 266.

<sup>164</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer 1906, p. 145.

<sup>165</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 142.

<sup>166</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 145, and Guðmundsson (1965), p. 174.

the 'principal oversight of the whole work'. There is no mention, however, of any master architect, master builder or indeed anyone of the builders at all. No mention anywhere reveals who the builders of the cathedral were or where they came from - but the work they left behind gives us certain hints, as we shall see.

It is thought, as mentioned above, that this first part of the cathedral was finished and could be consecrated in the time before Earl Ragnvald and Bishop William embarked on their two year long journey to the Holy Land and Palestine. This pilgrimage/crusade was the result of a trip Earl Ragnvald had made to Norway in the summer of 1148.<sup>167</sup> The saga says that after agreeing to make the journey to the Holy land Earl Ragnvald returned to Orkney and intended to stay there for two years before embarking on the journey along with Bishop William. On this point it seems that all the Orkney scholars agree, but when it comes to establishing a specific date or even year for their departure the opinions are many. Storer Clouston in his *History of Orkney* has 1151 as their date of departure, whereas Lorentz Dietrichson seems to be having a hard time making up his mind on the matter, writing sometimes 1152, sometimes 1153.<sup>168</sup> On their return, however, he is both certain and consistent and dates it to December 1155. Stewart Cruden, on the other hand, is of the opinion that it must have been earlier. With the saga's praise of speed in one hand and the detailed accounts of the rapid rebuilding of Canterbury cathedral after the great fire of 1174, written by the monk Gervase of Canterbury, in the other he estimates that within five years the building would have had vaulted aisles and the main arcade of three bays with both triforium and clerestory levels as well as an apse. He also mentions, rightfully so, that there also would have been a certain urgency to exhibit the relics of St. Magnus in his new church. Based on this Cruden suggests a possible dedication date in the time around 1142/45.<sup>169</sup>

Whatever the exact date may have been it seems, to me, safe to assume that the first part of the building process and the consecration of the cathedral must have been done, probably by the time of the earl's departure, and at least by the time of his return – of which Dietrichson has the latest date, namely December 1155. The idea that the founder and benefactor of this great, new cathedral along with the head of the church in the islands would be absent at the inauguration and consecration of the building does not seem plausible. Nor that it would happen upon their return – of which there was no certainty. The journey to the Holy Land was a long and perilous one, even for an earl and a bishop with steady boats, good

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<sup>167</sup> Clouston (1932), p. 92.

<sup>168</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), pp. 141, 157, and 199.

<sup>169</sup> Cruden in Crawford (1988), p. 82.

men and solid finances. There was no guarantee for their safe return, and also, their exact return would be difficult, at best, to predict. It would not be possible for the builders to make a plan in which completion of the cathedral's first phase and consecration would coincide with the triumphant return of Ragnvald and William. Therefore, I am of the opinion that consecration of the edifice must have taken place prior to their departure – no later than 1151.

The work progressed and the east end of the building started to take shape, but with a large workforce and a pressing schedule funds soon began to run out. The Orkneyinga Saga tells of how economic difficulties arose during the first stage of construction and that work came to a halt when the earl could no longer afford to pay his workers. This however, was quickly resolved by an ingenious plan to let the farmers of Orkney buy back the odal rights to their lands for a “single payment of a sum per acre, paid at once, instead of according to the usual practice, on each succession.”<sup>170</sup> It is said that this pleased the Orcadians, who paid one mark for each acre of land they owned in the islands. After this, the saga recollects, there was no shortage of funds and work progressed at a steady pace.<sup>171</sup> Indeed, from the architecture seen at Kirkwall, Richard Fawcett writes that it seems the budget at Kirkwall started out rather tight, but loosened significantly as the work progressed.<sup>172</sup>

## 6.2. Phase II

The end of the first building campaign is believed to coincide with the death of Bishop William in 1168 and Henry Dryden estimates the second phase of building to have taken place between 1160 and 1200.<sup>173</sup> The second phase is the period of Bishop William II and of Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson who held the see of Orkney for 35 years, from the death of William II in 1188 until his own death in 1223. This part of the building project is characterized by a transitional style, with the use of semi-circular arches in the ornamental parts of the building whereas the constructional parts of the edifice is characterized by pointed arches and transitional style ornaments. It may be, however, that little work was put into the building during the time of William II. There are hints that the construction work was progressing slowly and in a rather faltering manner. It seems however, like all this changed with William's death in 1188 and the election of a new Orkney bishop – Bjarni Kolbeinsson. From this point on there seems to be signs of a strong driving force behind the construction work as well as a substantial influx of money. From around this time we see “An act of great

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<sup>170</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 273

<sup>171</sup> Pálsson & Edwards (1981), p. 142.

<sup>172</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 89.

<sup>173</sup> Dryden (1878), p. 23.

optimism which reflected the changed architectural and ecclesiastical ideas of the time” writes Richard Fawcett.<sup>174</sup> It seems a renewed effort has been put into the construction around this time. Work was begun on extending the nave westwards, the choir was extended eastwards for an additional three bays, the crossing taken down and rebuilt, and the transept chapels were enlarged – all this simultaneously it seems. Bjarni’s episcopacy covers an important part of the construction work and it is tempting to give him the credit for all the progressive work that was done on the cathedral around this time.<sup>175</sup>

The extension of the nave westwards is suggested by the piers in the nave, or rather by their capitals, which as described above are no longer octagonal and cushioned, but rather they are round and moulded. The windows of the nave as far as the north and south doorways show signs of a transitional date. The nave with its piers and walls up to the triforium level, have probably been extended all the way up to the north and south aisle doorways at this time. The north aisle doorway, MacGibbon & Ross notes, “is Norman in detail, but seems to have been restored at a late date”<sup>176</sup> although they give no stipulation as to what this later date may have been. They only talk of this period as being ‘Norman’ but give no exact dates beyond that. Dietrichson & Meyer place this work in ‘phase two’ of the construction, but like MacGibbon and Ross, they too are careful of dating the work.

Although work on the choir area and the crossing seem to have been undertaken at approximately the same time, carvings on the decorative capitals reveal that it was to the central crossing and the remodelling of the transept chapels attention turned after only a short while. The style of the chapels may have been affected and influenced by the square transept chapels at the mother church in Trondheim. There are however, similar chapels of approximately the same date found in England as well, at Chichester cathedral. It must also be mentioned that as the cathedral at Trondheim is largely English in its design, it may perhaps be that the master builder at Trondheim was influenced by these same chapels.

The chapels are rebuilt in the transitional style, and Cruden estimates the date to be around 1170,<sup>177</sup> whereas Thurlby believes it to be of a somewhat later date and agrees with Fawcett in that the work may well have been done under the episcopacy of Bjarni Kolbeinsson.<sup>178</sup> The reason for rebuilding the crossing only about thirty something years after it was begun is unknown. Cruden presumes that the original crossing has at some point

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<sup>174</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 97.

<sup>175</sup> *ibid*

<sup>176</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 277.

<sup>177</sup> Cruden (1977), p. 90.

<sup>178</sup> Thurlby (1997), p. 866.

collapsed and if any elements of the old crossing now remain they have been incorporated into the new one.<sup>179</sup> Meyer writes in his essay on the building and its history in the *Monumenta* of how intentions were to endow the transept with a pair of towers, but that this idea was abandoned when the builders realised that adding the foundations to the already narrow passage of the central crossing would make the impression of the already narrow transept even narrower and consequently the idea was abandoned.<sup>180</sup>

In the transepts, new chapels were built, and it has been speculated that these were modelled on similar, square chapels at Nidaros Cathedral although similar chapels from around the same time are also found in England for example at the cathedral at Chichester from 1187 to 1199<sup>181</sup>. The upper part of the north transept was raised and windows inserted and the small, rectangular chapels were also built at this time and the arches remodelled. In the south transept however, no work was done until a later period.

The next step of construction has, by MacGibbon & Ross, been characterized as “a complete revolution in the eastern portion of the edifice.”<sup>182</sup> The eastern apse was taken down and the choir was extended by an additional three bays. The new choir was terminated in a flat wall with a great rose window dominating the eastern wall. Although it has been “grossly over-restored”<sup>183</sup> it still has some qualities which allow us to say something about what it once looked like. It covers the main bulk of the wall and must have been completed along with the presbytery clerestory – probably sometime in the second quarter of the thirteenth century.<sup>184</sup> It is made up from a large, pointed arch with an oculus inserted at the top, beneath the apex of the arch and with smaller, pointed arch, lancet windows with twinned lights below. The tracery inside the oculus is modern as is the tracery in the paired lights below although both features seem to be based on what may once have been. Thurlby writes that if the window is an integral part of Bishop Bjarni Kollbeinssons presbytery it is one of the earliest of its kind in Britain and subsequently of great import importance for the history of ecclesiastical architecture in the U.K.

The clustered shafts used in the new portions of the choir are of a quite different character than the earlier Romanesque ones and display certain ornamental features in the capitals and in the rounds and hollows of the shaft itself. There are also features in the choir aisles that correspond to those of the choir and make MacGibbon & Ross speculate that

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<sup>179</sup> Cruden (1977), p. 90.

<sup>180</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 149.

<sup>181</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 97.

<sup>182</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 280.

<sup>183</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 101.

<sup>184</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 102.

perhaps some of the French workers from the cathedrals at Uppsala or Trondheim were brought over to share their expertise.<sup>185</sup> The extension of the choir eastward seems to coincide with a trend in several English and Scottish churches at the time. An idea of accommodating the clergy in a more dignified manner as well as to “provide greater space and usually a more glorious setting for major shrines”<sup>186</sup> proliferated throughout Britain – something that suggests a strong Anglo-Scottish influence at this point. The termination of the choir in a straight wall gives the church a typical north Anglo/Scottish character.<sup>187</sup>

It seems it was around this time the decision to vault the eastern arm of the church was made - first the old choir, then the presbytery. The wall shafts that divide the bays of the triforium level are single slender shafts and seem to have been designed mainly as decorative elements, adding to the vertical movement of the building. From the triforium gallery the arches spring upwards into the clerestory where they become triplets of shafts, indicating that they were meant as support for the daring new, quadripartite vaulting.<sup>188</sup> The bosses of the vaulting exhibit skilled masonry in the form of foliage knots, as mentioned above. This work, which must be the latest parts of the vaulting, has from the stonework been dated to sometime well into the second quarter of the thirteenth century.<sup>189</sup>

At the same time as the above work was being carried out in the eastern end of the cathedral, work was also progressing in the nave. It seems to be during this time that the idea of an adjacent cloister on the south side of the building (like at Durham and Dunfermline) was abandoned and the small door at the eastern end of the nave, the so-called prior’s door, was walled up.<sup>190</sup> MacGibbon & Ross speculate that the door in the south transept was constructed from the Norman arcade when the idea of having an adjacent cloister was abandoned. With its polychrome pointed arches and exquisite decorations it much resembles the three portals of the western front. It has been thought that because the one door was walled up and the other put in instead the decision to abandon the cloister was made rather swiftly and the need for a ‘prior’s door’ was superfluous. The cathedral at Durham and the abbey at Dunfermline both have these adjacent cloisters and probably served as models for Kirkwall. Exactly why the construction of a cloister at Kirkwall was abandoned we do not know.

Farther to the west in the nave, attention was now turned to the wall arcading and to the windows of the north and south aisles. In the fifth bay from the crossing, in the north aisle,

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<sup>185</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 280.

<sup>186</sup> Thurlby (1997), p. 868.

<sup>187</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 144.

<sup>188</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 102.

<sup>189</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 103.

<sup>190</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 143.

the designer of the arcading changes from the earlier style cushion capitals and starts using more decoratively carved water leaf capitals. These capitals seem to be very similar to examples found in Byland abbey in Yorkshire and from this Fawcett has dated the capitals at Kirkwall to approximately 1190.<sup>191</sup> The wall arcading was completed, it seems, into the sixth bay from the crossing in the south aisle and into the fifth bay in the north aisle. Attention was then turned to the windows in the south aisle. Crockets were given to the windows in the third to the sixth bays from the crossing - the stonework suggesting sometime around 1200. Then, in the north aisle, the half-built window in the fourth bay from the crossing was completed with a mix of old and new shafts on each side and topped off by a gothic style arch. Probably, the nave was now constructed up till the sixth bays from the crossing, both on the north and south sides and on all levels.

According to Dietrichson the work now came to something of a standstill with the passing of Bishop Bjarni. The driving force and the visionary behind the building project was gone and it would be another 25 years or so before construction got going again in or around 1250.

### **6.3. Phase III**

When construction started again, work on a new and spectacular western front was begun, separately, at two bay's length away from the main body of the cathedral. Albeit not a part of the original design, new ideas had no doubt come along as the work progressed and styles and influences changed. The newly completed nave would have been sealed off from the elements by some sort of wall. It has been speculated that this wall would have been made out of stone although there is no archaeological evidence to support this. It may instead be that it would have been some sort of makeshift construction made out of wood and slate.<sup>192</sup> It seems that the original plan at Kirkwall was to erect a tall western façade with twin towers, much like the western front at Dunfermline. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century foundations were discovered for twin towers at the original western front, but this idea appears to have been abandoned when the nave was extended westwards.<sup>193</sup> It seems, to me, a valid question whether perhaps these foundations could have been the foundations for the makeshift wall for the closing off of the nave from the elements, indeed built out of stone. Then again, as Fawcett mentions, building a makeshift wall out of stone would demand a large amount of resources, something that would

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<sup>191</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 105.

<sup>192</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 106.

<sup>193</sup> Wilson, Bryce: 'Why St. Magnus Cathedral was Built, And how it Changed' in: Callaghan & Wilson (2001), p. 17.



divert workers and slow the progression to the western doorways. A wall of a more simple character does indeed seem more likely.

The three western doorways that took shape were unrivalled in both the northern parts of England as well as in Scotland and was firmly rooted in continental traditions of cathedral building. One of the few possible existing parallels that can be found is a processional door at Dryburgh abbey. This work is dated to around the first decade of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but Kirkwall must be somewhat later – probably closer to the middle of the century, according to Fawcett.<sup>194</sup> The pointed arch doorway in the south transept is also believed to be of the same date.<sup>195</sup> When the doorways and the two pairs of extra pillars for the nave had been constructed, the old western front was taken down and the two structures were fused together as one.

It seems that around this time work slowed once more - around the time of the completion of the central tower. The two new, additional bays of the nave were left in a rather unfinished manner, with none of the intersecting wall arcading like the earlier parts of the nave. This may perhaps explain why the external buttresses are more massive here than on other parts of the cathedral. The ceiling was never vaulted and what had started as a glorious and quite ambitious project must at this point have seemed rather faulty. A curious detail is where the masons would link the new western portion of the edifice to the already completed six bays of the nave. In the middle of the third arcade on the south side of the nave it seems the builders were a tad bit off and the joining of the two parts did not go as smoothly as they must have hoped for. In the area around the key-stone is a small, crooked dent suggesting the builders were unsuccessful in fusing the two portions of the cathedral together in a seamless fashion. This however is no simple task, and even today, with our laser measurements and digital remedies engineers need to keep a watchful eye in these kinds of operations.

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<sup>194</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 109.

<sup>195</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 282 and Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 144.



#### 6.4. Phase IV

After a long period of standstill it seems that work on the cathedral commenced again towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Dietrichson & Meyer seem to be of the opinion that this fourth and final leg of the construction work took place in the years between 1418 and 1455. The upper parts of the western front were completed. This work is of a much simpler character than the three portals below and was probably not finished until the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>196</sup> There are large, blank areas of walling and the intersecting tracery of the central window is “strangely limping”.<sup>197</sup> At the same time the decision was made to abandon the vaulting of last two, westernmost bays altogether. This has lead scholars to believe that once again funds were running low and that the main focus was no longer to create a magnificent house of worship, but rather to complete the cathedral as quickly and as cost effectively as possible. Something that sounds all too familiar to modern day people! It was not until the restoration works in 1848 that the two bays were given a wooden vaulting,<sup>198</sup> and later, in the 1970’s, a stone vaulting came in place.<sup>199</sup>

Notwithstanding the conservation and preservation of the building that has been done at different times throughout the cathedral’s history, from its medieval beginnings all the way into our own day and age, it becomes clear that the cathedral itself as it appears to us today

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<sup>196</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 284.

<sup>197</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 109.

<sup>198</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 289.

<sup>199</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 110.

must have been completed sometime around the episcopacy of Bishop Thomas de Tulloch, who held the See from 1461 to 1477.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 109.



PART IV  
Comparative Material



## 7. Comparative Material

The intention of the following chapter is to place Kirkwall cathedral within a larger architectural context. It is my feeling that a short presentation of comparative material is necessary to be able to place the St. Magnus cathedral within a context of cathedral building in the north-west Atlantic region and to be able to appreciate its place in western European cathedral building as well. It has been established that Kirkwall cathedral is one of several churches and abbeys throughout northern England and Scotland that owe their design to the great cathedral at Durham and what is commonly referred to as 'The Durham school'. Although the building was planned by Norsemen in lands ruled over by Norsemen it seems the builders of the first Romanesque cathedral at Kirkwall came from Durham by way of Dunfermline and so it seems only natural to have a short, comparative glance at these churches.

Also, in Norway, the great cathedral at Trondheim was under construction from around 1150 as the mother church of the newly established Metropolitan See there. This must have been a grand undertaking that no doubt would have generated a ripple effect throughout the architectural community of the north-west Atlantic regions, and so it seems only reasonable to include this building in the comparative material as well. As we have seen, there are several churches found throughout northern Britain and Scotland that all have resemblances to Kirkwall cathedral, and the context.<sup>201</sup> The styles of the cathedrals of Scandinavia seem to suggest that they have been built from continental influences and by continental builders, or at least under the supervision of someone trained in continental Europe. Whereas the cathedral at Lund, for example, is German-Lombardic in character, the cathedral at Trondheim is mainly English, as we shall see later on.

In the following I am to give a short presentation of the cathedral at Durham and the royal abbey at Dunfermline. These buildings are believed to be the forerunners to Kirkwall cathedral. In addition I will also glance shortly at Trondheim cathedral – the centre of the Metropolitan See under which Kirkwall was placed in 1152/53.

### 7.1 The Durham school

It seems to be appropriate to give a short account for the so-called Durham school, which proliferated throughout Northern England and Scotland upon completion of the great cathedral at Durham. It is thought that workers that had worked on the cathedral there took up

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<sup>201</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 89.

work on other churches throughout the region and it was through them that the styles of Durham were transferred to the different projects they worked on. Typical for the Durham school is that the aisles are separated from the nave by seven round, freestanding pillars in the heavy Norman fashion, apsidal termination of the choir and its aisles, stairwells in the transept towers. The style is also recognized for its calm and dignified use of shapes, its well-balanced proportions and sparse ornamentation that strongly emphasize the constructional lines of the building.<sup>202</sup>

Another recurring theme in the Durham School is the blind arcading of the walls. These round arched arcades serve not only a decorative purpose, but also a structural one. In carving them into the walls they make the walls thinner and hence lighter, and this in turn calls for less buttressing of the heavy, down and outward pull exercised by gravity. It is a clever design structurally as well as improving the richness and texture of the walls and it gives a more elaborate impression of the cathedral. Also, the more decoration like this one would have, the more workers were required and the higher the cost would be. It is, of course, a fact, then as now, that the more something costs the more appreciated it is.

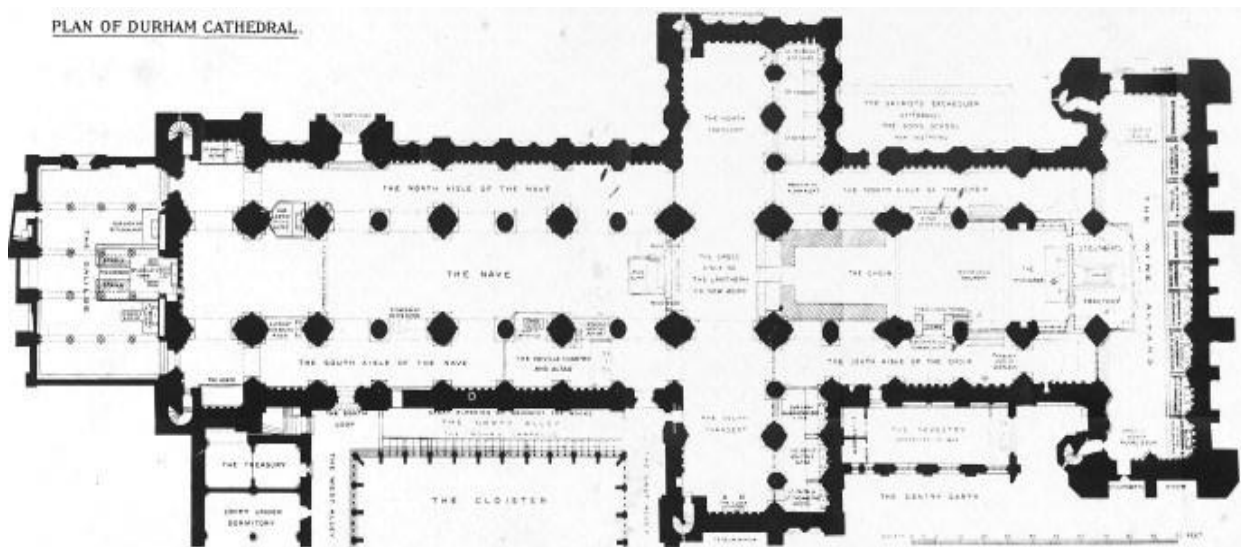
The pointed arch, although not typical for the Durham school, is a typical element of gothic architecture. By helping transport the weight from above more directly downward, they can carry a substantially larger load than their earlier, Romanesque, semi – circular counterparts. This allows not only for opening up the walls with windows, enabling more light to enter the building, it also creates a vertical movement in the building and helps draw the visitors gaze upwards, toward the heavens. This new style, with its space and light have often been referred to as the *Lux Nova*, the new light, because it represents a break from the old Romanesque style of building with its heavy walling and small windows.

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<sup>202</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 167.



## 7.2. Durham cathedral



Picture taken from The Cortauld Institute of Art.<sup>203</sup>

Both MacGibbon & Ross as well as Dietrichson & Meyer mention the so-called Durham school, arguing that with the construction of Durham cathedral a new style of cathedral architecture was borne. This style proliferated throughout northern England as well as Scotland and the northern isles and can be seen in ecclesiastical buildings of various size and character, from the small abbey at Selby to the Lindisfarne priory church and, as we shall see, the royal abbey at Dunfermline.<sup>204</sup>

As the river Wear winds its way through the Northumbrian landscape it forms a U shape around the southern part of the city of Durham. Some 900 years ago this was, according to John Field, rural land with only a few scattered settlements belonging to a small farming community. The Durham peninsula had been a place of worship for generations and when work began on Durham cathedral in the summer of 1093 it would be the fourth church to occupy this same spot.<sup>205</sup> The founding of the present day cathedral is attributed to Bishop William of Saint Calais or Saint Carleaf, upon his return from exile in Normandy. It has been speculated that Bishop William ordered the earlier church at Durham demolished before returning and that he, upon his return, had with him drawings for a new and grand

<sup>203</sup> Picture taken from The Cortauld Institute of Art via the web page:

<http://www.gotik-romanik.de/DurhamThumbnails/Grundriss.%20Foto%20Courtauld%20Institute%20of%20Art.html>

<sup>204</sup> Cambridge in Crawford (1988), p. 114.

<sup>205</sup> Field, John: *Durham Cathedral – Light of the North*. London: Third Millennium Publishing, 2006, p. 30.

cathedral.<sup>206</sup> Unfortunately no documents from the construction remain today and there are doubts concerning the authenticity of these claims. Whatever the case may be, it is said that Bishop William steered the work with such ambition that the choir was already consecrated to St. Cuthbert when he died in 1096.<sup>207</sup> Do we perhaps once more hear the praise of a good start? William's church was completed some 31 years later, in 1133.<sup>208</sup> Malcolm III, Canmore – King of Scots is said to have been present on that day in August 1093, to lay the foundation stones together with Bishop William and his Prior Turgot, who was also the biographer and confessor of Malcolm's wife, Margaret, Queen of Scots.<sup>209</sup> The fact that the Scottish King was there alongside the ecclesiastics, if at all a fact, may well have been a part of an on-going border dispute between the kings of England and Scotland. If in fact King Malcolm was there it is significant for the proliferation of the Durham School. For another great church would be built at Malcolm's residence at Dunfermline, as we shall see later on.

Durham cathedral has an imposing exterior. Reaching high above the surrounding trees it is said to be the "undisputed masterpiece of early Norman architecture"<sup>210</sup> and the leading senior of the many suffragans of the so-called Durham school.<sup>211</sup> The cathedral is laid out in the normal east/west direction and measures 143 meters in length.<sup>212</sup> The building is, as we have seen above, much lower in proportion to its width than the cathedral at Kirkwall, measuring 1: 2,3 as opposed to Kirkwall's 1:2,8.<sup>213</sup> Durham cathedral is mainly constructed from local sandstone, much of which was quarried from the river gorge around the horseshoe peninsula.<sup>214</sup> It is a three aisled basilical style cross church, yet today it differs a lot from the 'clean' and somewhat minimalistic shape of the roman basilica. The western front is a massive westwork with large square towers on both sides and with the centre part defined by

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<sup>206</sup> Devonshire, C. & R. Wilkie: 'The Building of the Cathedral' in: Jackson, Michael J. (ed.): *Engineering a Cathedral*. London: Thomas Telford, 1993, p. 17.

It seems worth noting that Devonshire and Wilkie write on page 17 that Bishop William "ordered the existing White Church demolished before his return from France". John Field however, says that the so called White Church, or Alba Ecclesia, was a "structure of wattle and daub" that was followed by the so-called *ecclesia major*, "a substantial church of stone". (Both quotes are from: Field (2006), p. 30.)

It is hard to know who to trust the most, but seeing that Field's book dates from 2006, whereas Devonshire and Wilkie wrote in 1993 it seems fair to assume that new knowledge may have come to during the 13 years that separate the two publications. Nevertheless one would assume that this kind of knowledge would be available from much earlier times.

<sup>207</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 166.

<sup>208</sup> Cambridge in Crawford (1988), p. 111.

<sup>209</sup> Rollason, D.: 'Durham Cathedral 1093 – 1193: sources and history' in: Jackson (1993), p. 6 and MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 238.

<sup>210</sup> Cant & Firth: *Light in the North*, p. 12.

<sup>211</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 165.

<sup>212</sup> [www.durhamcathedral.co.uk/history](http://www.durhamcathedral.co.uk/history)

<sup>213</sup> Cambridge in Crawford (1988), p. 113.

<sup>214</sup> Johnson, G. A. L.: 'The Geological setting of Durham Cathedral' in: Jackson (1993), p. 115.

a very large, pointed arch stained glass window with elaborate tracery. Beneath the large western window the so-called Galilee chapel protrudes westwards for four bays. On the exterior it has crenellation on the roof and on the western end of the chapel are five large stained glass windows. Beneath these windows we find five corresponding portals revealing the chapel's internal divisions. It has five aisles with quatrefoil pillars and semi-circular arches with a saw tooth moulding in three orders. The galilee chapel is a later addition to the cathedral, ascribed to Bishop Hugh du Puiset, begun in 1175 and completed 14 years later, in 1189.<sup>215</sup> The chapel contains, among others, the tomb of the venerable Bede.

The tower over the central crossing of the transept is a large square structure, 'heavy' in appearance and with tall, narrow lancet windows giving it a somewhat lighter appearance and adding to the vertical movement of the building. The central tower at Durham is said to exhibit (along with some other English cathedrals) the climax of the perpendicular style architecture in Britain.<sup>216</sup> At the building's eastern end is another transept, made up of three bays, the central of which holds the tomb of Saint Cuthbert – the Lindisfarne Bishop to whom the cathedral is consecrated. This area is known as the Nine Altars Chapel and was begun constructed in 1242.<sup>217</sup> However, as we see from the dates of both the Galilee Chapel and the Nine Altars Chapel, they were not part of the original design. The church that was finished in 1133 was a 'cleaner', basilical structure, more true to its roman origins than what we see today. It was of course this first church that was, and is, the model for the so-called *Durham School* and its proliferation as mentioned above.

The nave of Durham consists of 8 bays with aisles, a triforium and a clerestory. There are seven pairs of freestanding pillars throughout the length of the nave. The first pair at the western end of the nave have clustered shafts and are almost identical to the pillars supporting the central crossing, only here they reach into a wooden, saddle ceiling. With the second pair of pillars an alternating pattern of compound piers and heavy circular piers of the Norman type begins. Also the ceiling is made up of stone vaulting from this point. Every other pair of piers from this point have clustered shafts and cushioned capitals and reach upward to clerestory level where they are supporting the ribbed stone vaulting of the ceiling, which, according to, among others, David Watkin, is the oldest of its sort found in Europe.<sup>218</sup> He

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<sup>215</sup> Field (2006), p. 54.

<sup>216</sup> Watkin (2005), p. 182.

<sup>217</sup> Johnson in Jackson (1993), p. 118.

<sup>218</sup> Watkin (2005), p. 132.

suggests that Durham was conceived from the start to be groin-vaulted in stone,<sup>219</sup> a rather unusual feat for a cathedral of that day and age.

The alternating pairs are heavy and circular with octagonal capitals like the ones found at Kirkwall, supporting the triforium arcade. These round, Norman piers are incised with different types of relief patterns. Notwithstanding their size, the first pair is reminiscent of classical Greco-Roman pillars with vertical, concave shavings, the second pair having a zig-zag chevron pattern around it, while the third and final pair of the round Norman type is decorated with a checkered lozenge pattern. The arcades of the nave have round arches in three orders. The first of which is adorned with billet moulding around the edge and chevron pattern on the following order. The innermost order of the arch has no pattern but has a concave form. The triforium gallery has a row of windows inserted into it allowing for extra light to seep into the large nave below. From the outside, this gives the façade two rows of windows instead of the usual one. In the nave aisle walls, like at Kirkwall, there is a northern and a southern doorway placed in the third bays. The northern one is quite large in size, whereas the southern one is somewhat smaller and is leading out into the adjacent, square cloister garden with ambulatory as well as the chapter house. As we have seen above this was probably the idea at Kirkwall as well, but was, of course, never built.

The central crossing is defined by four tall compound piers with semi-circular arches. The transepts are made up of three bays in each arm. They are aisled, but only along the eastern side of the wall. Here the alternating pattern of the nave recurs. In each of the transept arms are found two circular Norman type piers with spiral pattern relief. They are separated by the same type of compound piers as are found in the nave. The entrance into the choir is marked by a crossing screen, carved in stone and with a great deal of fine, decorative stonework and tracery. It has three pointed arch openings and a gable with a cross at the apex over the central opening. Notwithstanding its highly medieval appearance this stone screen is part of a 19<sup>th</sup> century restoration work.<sup>220</sup> The choir itself consists of four bays before the Nine Altars Chapel opens up like a second transept. Originally the choir would have had only three bays and both the chancel and the aisles would have had apsidal terminations.<sup>221</sup> This was the first part of the cathedral to be constructed, but already by the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the apses and the walling of the east end of the building were showing signs of

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<sup>219</sup> Watkin (2005), p. 132.

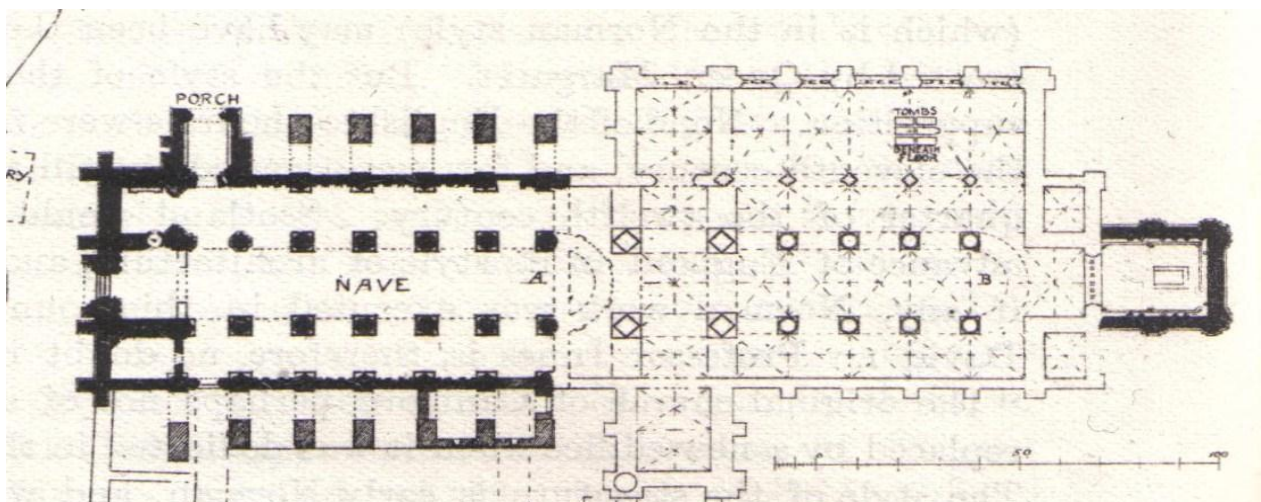
<sup>220</sup> Field (2006), p. 146

<sup>221</sup> Plan of the cathedral drawn by R. W. Billings and presented as a fold out in Cramp, Rosemary: 'The Pre-Conquest Sculptural Tradition in Durham' in: Coldstream, Nicola & Peter Draper: *Medieval Art and Architecture at Durham Cathedral – The British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions for the Year 1977, vol. III*. London: The British Archaeological Association, 1980, between pp. 2 and 3.

collapse due to the soft ground they were built on. The alternating pattern of the pillars continues in the choir as it did throughout the nave and transept. There are three compound piers and two circular Norman piers, both of which are incised with a spiral pattern relief similar to the second pair of round piers in the nave.

Begun in 1096 and completed in 1033 we see that the dates for the original, Romanesque cathedral at Durham and the cathedral at Kirkwall correspond with each other. It is not at all unnatural to think that workers, finished with their tasks at Durham, travelled north in search of new work and found their way to Kirkwall via Dunfermline.

### 7.3. Dunfermline abbey



Picture taken from MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 232.

Across the border into Scotland, some 25 kilometres north of Edinburgh, lies the town of Dunfermline. The town was from an early period, according to MacGibbon & Ross, enjoyed as a “secure and pleasant city by the kings of Scotland.”<sup>222</sup> In the year 1070 the Scottish King, Malcolm III Canmore married Margaret, a princess and royal refugee from England here. It is said that immediately after the marriage, Margaret, now Queen of Scots, had a small abbey erected in the place where the nuptials had been celebrated.<sup>223</sup>

After their deaths in 1093, Malcolm and Margaret were both interred in the church she had patroned. From this time onwards Dunfermline abbey would become the final resting place for several of Scotland’s royals.<sup>224</sup> Their two sons, Alexander I and David I expanded the church westwards with a nave and aisles on both sides and added the now demolished transept. It has been suggested that the nave of the existing church, executed in the Early

<sup>222</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 230.

<sup>223</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 231.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

Norman style, was part of the same church that Margaret had built, but according to MacGibbon & Ross the style of the building makes this impossible as it would indicate that Scotland was more advanced than England in architectural expression and skilled labour – which indeed was not the case.<sup>225</sup> According to Cosmo Innes the nave was dedicated in 1150.<sup>226</sup> It is therefore thought that the church of Queen Margaret must have been a wooden one and that the nave of the present church is part of a later building, possibly the church of King David I who ascended the throne in 1124. Circa 1128 has been suggested by Fawcett as a starting date for the new church.<sup>227</sup> This would also allow for a natural succession from Durham.

Dietrichson & Meyer talk of an Augustinian priory in connection to the church, added adjacent to the south side of the nave, and Professor Dietrichson adds that, although gone, the foundations remain and the whole mass of buildings seem to greatly resemble those at Durham.<sup>228</sup> Indeed it seems that when David I succeeded his brother Alexander to the throne he had monks brought north to Dunfermline from Canterbury and an Augustinian priory was formed. The priory is said to have flourished and in 1216 work was begun to rebuild the church to form a new choir and transept, befitting the convent.<sup>229</sup> The irony is that the extensive rebuilding was so expensive it left the monastery greatly impoverished, the Abbot having to appeal to the pope for “certain patronages and presentations.”<sup>230</sup> In 1250 Queen Margaret was canonised and her remains transferred from their resting place in the old church to the new Lady Chapel in the eastern portion of the building.

The church as it appears today is quite different from the medieval abbey. It is, in fact, two distinctly different churches joined together at the middle. The above plan of the church shows the medieval layout to the west and the modern, eastern parts dating from the 1880s to the east. It too is a basilical church laid out in east/west direction. Seen from the outside the abbey has clear divisions, separating the old and smaller nave from the younger and larger eastern portions of the building. The central crossing marks the transition from the old to the new. It supports a square tower with pinnacles in all four corners and a parapet in between them. The parapet is made up of large upper case letters spelling out KING ROBERT THE BRUCE, one word on each of the four sides starting on the southern side of the tower and running counter clockwise around it.

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<sup>225</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 231.

<sup>226</sup> Innes (1860), pp. 294 – 295.

<sup>227</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 89.

<sup>228</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 167.

<sup>229</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 231.

<sup>230</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 232.

The western front is a massive westwork with flanking towers to the north and south. The south side tower is massive and square. It has crenellation around the top and the façade's only feature is a tall, narrow, pointed arch window towards the top. The northern tower is somewhat taller than its southern counterpart. It has a parapet around the top with corbels underneath and it is roofed with an octagonal spire. Beneath the corbels there is placed a round arched window on each of the towers four walls. On ground level the tower has a pointed arch lancet window with some tracery. The central part of the westwork is defined by a round arched doorway set in a small protruding porch and consisting of 5 orders decorated with a chevron pattern and rosettes as well as with some geometrical figures. Above the doorway is a pointed arch lancet window with tracery. Above this is a circular window with an equal armed cross inside and with some tracery. The central part of the westwork is topped off with a row of four pointed arch windows and a gable above them. These are all part of a later 16<sup>th</sup> century restoration work. Along the outer wall of the six bays of the older nave are large and rather heavy flying buttresses alongside the entire length of the nave. These are also part of restoration work dating from the latter half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>231</sup> The church has undergone considerable building, destruction and rebuilding. However, it is the old, medieval nave of Dunfermline that is of interest here and the later eastern parts of the building do not require any special attention.

The arcade of the nave is made up of seven freestanding piers, coherent with the Durham school. The first bays on both sides of the nave, as well as the triforium arches above them have been completely filled up with solid mass to support and strengthen the western towers. The piers here are compound piers and form the first pair of piers in the nave. Immediately to the east of the tower supports are two doorways, one in each aisle. The northern one is Norman and part of the original structure whereas the southern one is of a younger date, yet there appears to have been another southern doorway leading into the adjacent cloister, now walled shut, at the eastern end of the nave. On the northern side the second pier from the west is also a compound pier on an octagonal base, whereas its southern counterpart is a heavy circular pier, the same as is seen in both Durham and Kirkwall, with octagonal capital and square base. The remaining piers throughout the nave are all of the same round type. The sixth pair of piers from the west are decorated with zig-zag chevron carvings whereas the last pair of the nave are incised with spiral carvings. Both are in deep relief and fill the entire height of the pillar. The round arches of the arcade are decorated with billet

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<sup>231</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 238.

moulding and rest on octagonal capitals as is the case at both Kirkwall and Durham. Originally, this was where the transept would have crossed, but instead there is now a simple, round arched doorway leading into the newer portion of the abbey.

It is difficult to say with any real certainty, but it seems that the medieval transept would have been without aisles and with eastward protruding chapels with apsidal terminations. Similar transepts can be found at Selby Abbey and Southwell Minster says Dietrichson & Meyer and adds that these two also fall in under the so called Durham school.<sup>232</sup>

Above the arcade of the nave is the triforium with a gallery. The triforium arcade is rather simple in style, with semi – circular single openings that correspond to the more elaborate arches of the nave. The abbey has an extra row of windows on the triforium level, giving the façade two rows of windows instead of the usual one. This, according to Cruden, appears nowhere else in Scotland, but it does, as we have seen, at Durham.<sup>233</sup> Above all this, there is a simple clerestory level with one window in each bay, also with semi – circular arches and corresponding to the arches below, making a clear downwards movement in the nave. All the arches in synch like this also help create a horizontal flow of perspective in the room. The ceiling of the nave is wooden with beams running transverse across and resting upon semi-circular wooden arches which in turn are supported by corbels fastened on the upper triforium level.

Blind arcades run along the walls of the entire nave, only interrupted by younger monuments or by the compound piers supporting the groin vaults in the aisles. The arcades are made up of round arches resting on single shafts with a chevron pattern ‘radiating’ outward in what seems almost like rays of the sun. This feature has been among the ones used in linking Kirkwall to Durham. This may be true, but as Richard Fawcett points out, the blind arcades found at Durham are not of the exact same type as at Kirkwall. Fawcett suggests that though the idea of blind arcading may well have come from Durham, it has likely come through an intermediary such as, perhaps, the small medieval church at Leuchars in Fife, situated four and a half miles from the ecclesiastical centre at Saint Andrews.<sup>234</sup> At Leuchars and Kirkwall alike a triangular spur can be seen between the paired shafts and although their areas of use differ somewhat the style is unmistakably the same.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 167.

<sup>233</sup> Cruden (1986), p. 33.

<sup>234</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 94.

<sup>235</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 94.



As with Kirkwall cathedral, says Richard Fawcett, the proportions are executed so that the building appears larger and more spacious than what is actually the case.<sup>236</sup> The nave, according to MacGibbon & Ross, measures on the inside 106 ft. long by 55 ft. wide between the aisle walls.<sup>237</sup> Stewart Cruden divides the construction periods of medieval Dunfermline into 4 periods beginning with the small Romanesque church of King Malcolm finished in 1070, Queen Margaret's church 1070 – 1093, King David's church 1124 – 1150 and the shrine of Malcolm and Margaret around 1250.<sup>238</sup> We know that King Malcolm III Canmore (whose first queen, Ingibjorg, was daughter of Earl Thorfinn the Mighty) may have been present at the founding of Durham cathedral, and there is no doubt that the nave at Dunfermline much resembles that of Durham.<sup>239</sup> Queen Margaret's church is said to have been the first Romanesque church in Scotland, although Thorfinn's Christchurch at Birsay, notwithstanding its certain archaic features, one could claim it to be the "forerunner of the Romanesque style in Scotland."<sup>240</sup> This is of course exciting as seen from a Scandinavian perspective. That the Norse settlements in the Atlantic perhaps were building more elaborately than the Royalty of Scotland. One must, of course, remember that at the time when Thorfinn built his Christchurch, Orkney was a part of Norway. Even so, Thorfinn, and the people of Orkney for that matter, had close ties with Scotland, Thorfinn being an Earl over large Scottish dominions no less than nine times as well as being the grandson of King Malcolm II.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Fawcett in Crawford (1988), p. 88.

<sup>237</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 234.

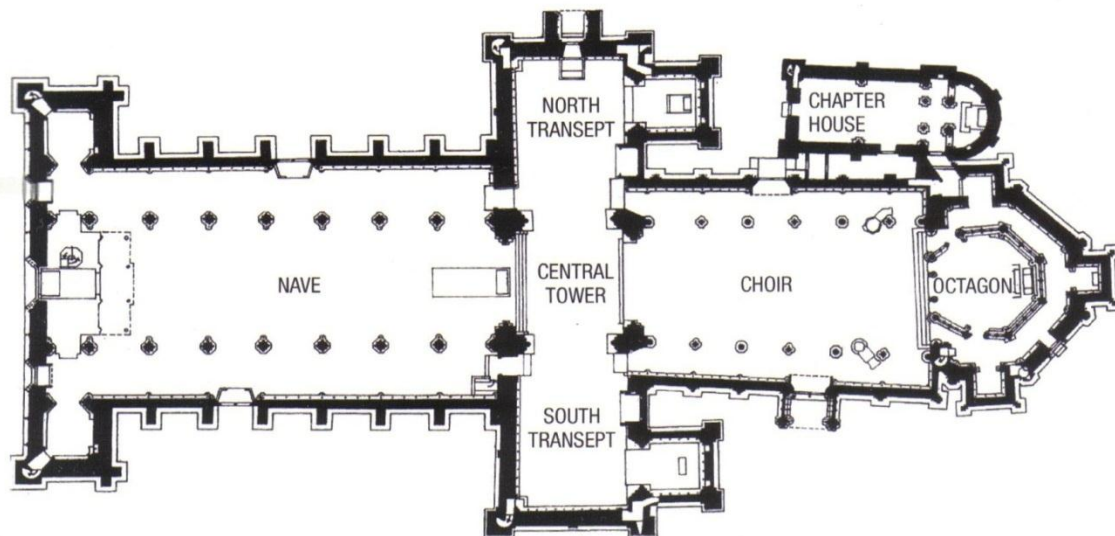
<sup>238</sup> Cruden in Crawford (1988), p. 22.

<sup>239</sup> MacGibbon & Ross (1896), p. 238.

<sup>240</sup> Cruden (1986), p. 20.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

#### 7.4. Trondheim cathedral



Plan taken from: Ekroll (2009), p. 65.

By the time the cathedral at Trondheim was finished, in or around the year 1300 it was the largest of all the Scandinavian cathedrals.<sup>242</sup> However, its appearance today is much the result of an extensive restoration project begun in 1869.<sup>243</sup> Several devastating fires have ravaged the cathedral throughout history, the first one as early as 1328 – not three decades after its initial completion. In 1432 and 1531 the cathedral burned again and by the time of the reformation in 1536/7 the building was “left like an empty shell.”<sup>244</sup> Repairs were begun, but subsequent fires in 1708 and 1719 destroyed most of what was built up. All of the woodwork was engulfed in the flames, the nave walls collapsed as did the roof and much of the western front save the base course of statues.<sup>245</sup> It was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century when Norway, alongside the rest of Europe, was experiencing a cultural and historical awakening that restoration of the building was begun. The cathedral at that point was in miserable condition and restoring it to its former glory would be a mammoth undertaking. Nevertheless, in 1869 a restoration project was launched that continues even to this day.

The cathedral at Trondheim is said to be the final resting place of Norway’s patron saint and eternal king – St. Olav Haraldsson who was killed in battle at Stiklestad, north of

<sup>242</sup> Ekroll, Øystein: ‘The Shrine of Saint Olav in Nidaros Cathedral’ in: Andås, Margrete S. & al.: *The Medieval Cathedral of Trondheim – Architectural and Ritual Constructions in their European Context*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2007, p. 148.

<sup>243</sup> Lunde, Øivind: ‘Nidaros Domkirkes Restaureringsarbeider (NDR), 140 års historie og nye utfordringer’ in: Bjørlykke & al.: *Nidarosdomen – ny forskning på gammel kirke*. Nidaros Domkirkes Restaureringsarbeiders Forlag: Trondheim, 2010, p. 9

<sup>244</sup> Ekroll (2010), p. 9.

<sup>245</sup> Ekroll (2010), p. 36.

Trondheim, in the year 1030. Rumours of the Kings body working miracles of healing quickly emerged and a year after his death, King Olav was unearthed and proclaimed a saint. His coffin was placed above the altar in St. Clemet's church, north of the city settlement. A short time later a spring is said to have appeared at his former gravesite. A small wooden chapel is said to have been erected at the site and not long after pilgrims started coming there to offer their prayers.<sup>246</sup> This wooden structure was later replaced by a larger stone church founded by King Olav Kyrre (meaning the gentle) who died in 1093. This church was consecrated to Christ and the Holy trinity and was probably meant as a small cathedral.<sup>247</sup> According to tradition, the altar of Olav Kyrre's church was set above the place where St. Olav had been buried, although it has recently been suggested that St. Olav was never actually buried there at all, but rather in a sandbank to the south-west of the building.<sup>248</sup> According to Dietrichson & Meyer no appreciable part of this earlier stone structure remains save the foundations,<sup>249</sup> which have been identified and seem to much resemble the foundations of the cathedral church at Birsay, built by Earl Thorfinn.<sup>250</sup> It has been speculated that Olav Kyrre found inspiration for his church during the winter of 1066/67 when he stayed with Earl Thorfinn at Birsay upon returning from the battle at Stamford Bridge.<sup>251</sup>

In or around 1140 plans for a new and grand cathedral at Trondheim saw the light of day. This may perhaps have had something to do with the fact that a decade or so later, in 1152/53, Trondheim was separated from the archdiocese at Lund and granted Metropolitan rights.<sup>252</sup> Also, the growing number of pilgrims, mentioned by Adam of Bremen in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis*,<sup>253</sup> flocking to the martyred kings shrine needed to be accommodated and Olav Kyrre's Christchurch would soon have proved too small. The oldest parts of the cathedral are, as is to be expected, found in the choir and in parts of the transepts. Here are also found the remains of Olav Kyrre's Christchurch, now serving as foundations for the modern day choir and parts of the octagon.<sup>254</sup>

Trondheim cathedral is, like Durham and Dunfermline, a three aisled basilical church laid out in the east/west direction. The western front is a so-called screen front. This is a typical feature in English cathedral architecture and can be seen at, among others, the

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<sup>246</sup> Ekroll (2010), p. 10.

<sup>247</sup> Danbolt, Gunnar: *Nidarosdomen*. Oslo: Andresen & Butenschøn, 1997, p. 43.

<sup>248</sup> Ekroll (2010), p. 10.

<sup>249</sup> Dietrichson & Meyer (1906), p. 168.

<sup>250</sup> Danbolt (1997), p. 26.

<sup>251</sup> Danbolt (1997), p. 27 & Lidén in Crawford (1988), p. 72.

<sup>252</sup> Lidén in Crawford (1988), p. 76.

<sup>253</sup> *Gesta Hammaburgensis* (1993), pp. 104, 133 and 212.

<sup>254</sup> Danbolt (1997), p. 28.

cathedrals of Lincoln and Salisbury. A screen front is produced by placing the northern and southern tower of the western front far off to each side and filling the gap between them with a massive wall, covering the building behind it.<sup>255</sup> The screen front at Trondheim is decorated with no less than 72 sculptures of saints and kings from the Old Testament, each placed into a narrow recess with pointed arches and tracery. Among them we find St. Magnus Erlendsson of Orkney. Above the northern and southern corners of the western front are square towers with pointed arch windows. A parapet runs around the top of the towers and on each of the four corners there are pinnacles pointing towards the sky, adding to the vertical movement of the building. On the ground level there is an interlacing blind arcade with pointed arches into which the three main doorways of the western front are fitted. The central doorway has a pointed arch with three orders and is almost twice the size of the two aisle doors. Above the central doorway the magnificent rose window dominates the façade. It is fit into a large pointed arch with a carved gable with Christ in majesty above it. The façade is topped off with another gable with a relief of the triumphant Christ. The western front is massive and large but with so many vertical elements in it– the pointed arches, the gables, towers and pinnacles, it appears to almost be lifting of the ground and floating toward the heavens

Above the central crossing is a square tower topped off with four pinnacles and a large pointed copper roof. From the transept arms are square eastward projecting chapels in two floors and the eastern end of the edifice is terminated in an octagonal shaped choir with flying buttresses on the outside.

Inside, the nave consists of eight bays made up from nine free standing piers. The arcade has been badly damaged through time, but what has been preserved indicate that the original nave was built in the English High Gothic style with ties to the cathedral at Lincoln and to Westminster abbey.<sup>256</sup> It is made up of an arcade with clustered shafts and pointed arches supporting the triforium. Both the triforium and the clerestory levels have pointed arch windows and the ceiling is vaulted with fivepartite tiercerons.

The chancel is made up of six bays also with a pointed arch arcade in the Early English Gothic style.<sup>257</sup> The piers in this part of the building alternate between octagonal and cruciform with large scalloped capitals. The choir ceiling is cross vaulted with ribs. Instead of terminating in an apse or flat wall, the chancel at Trondheim is terminated in an octagon - an eight sided choir with ambulatory built in the time 1180 – 1220. It was here that St. Olav's

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<sup>255</sup> Ekroll (2010), p. 34

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ekroll (2010), p. 28.

shrine was kept.<sup>258</sup> It has been speculated that the shape of the octagon has been inspired by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem or perhaps by Charlemagne's octagonal Palatine Chapel at Aachen.<sup>259</sup> The entrance into the octagon from the chancel is made up of a pointed arch screen consisting of three tall pointed arches with a large crucifix above, the closest parallels to which we find, according to Ekroll, in Essex in England.<sup>260</sup>

As with St. Magnus cathedral, the cathedral at Trondheim also has the blind wall arcading, but that is where the similarity ends. At Trondheim, the blind arcades follow the walls of the interior with clean cut pointed arches in the nave and choir, whereas in the transepts they are of a somewhat earlier period, made up of Romanesque semi-circular arches. Throughout the wall arcading have single shafts with a wide variety of capitals. The arcading fills the entire stretch of wall, from the western doorways, through the transepts to the choir and octagon. This makes for a repetitive rhythmical pattern throughout the interior that gives the building a certain harmony.

The entrance into the central crossing is defined by a large pointed arch with its apex at clerestory level. It rests on clustered piers with foliated capitals. There are no aisles in the transepts. Instead two large, two-storied chapels were built, protruding eastwards. This is a feature unparalleled in English architecture of the period according to Lidén,<sup>261</sup> and this was later copied at Kirkwall when the transept chapels there were rebuilt, sometime after 1160.<sup>262</sup> It seems to be generally accepted among scholars of medieval ecclesiastical architecture that Trondheim cathedral is essentially English in character and it is assumed that most of the workers came from the large cathedrals in southern England.<sup>263</sup> Architecturally Trondheim cathedral was (and is) closely linked to the cathedral at Canterbury in England - the shrine of the martyred Bishop Thomas Becket,<sup>264</sup> but other links are also evident, such as the resemblance of the chapter house and the upper parts of the transepts with York cathedral and the choir built by Archbishop Roger,<sup>265</sup> and the so-called *crocket columns* found in the octagon. This type of columns, with crockets ornaments, can only be found two places in Europe, namely at Trondheim and at Lincoln cathedral in central England.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Ekroll (2010), p. 28.

<sup>259</sup> Ekroll (2010), p. 23.

<sup>260</sup> Ekroll (2010), p. 26.

<sup>261</sup> Lidén in Crawford (1988), p. 76.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Ekroll (2010), p. 14.

<sup>264</sup> Coldstream, Nicola: *Medieval Architecture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 158.

<sup>265</sup> Thurlby (1997), p. 885 & Ekroll (2010), p. 19.

<sup>266</sup> Ekroll (2010), p. 26.



Part V

Discussion and Conclusion





## 8. Discussion

It seems that scholars generally agree with Eric Cambridge when he writes that Kirkwall cathedral is “the latest in the series of Durham-inspired designs, started after the completion of Durham in 1133.”<sup>267</sup> We see in Kirkwall cathedral several links to different churches from both England and Scotland, but only small traces of resemblance to the mother church at Trondheim. It seems reasonable to think that as the cathedral at Durham was nearing completion more and more workers, finished as they were with their tasks there, started looking around for more work. The construction of a cathedral was a large enterprise that required a large workforce and word of the new cathedral at Kirkwall must have travelled fast around Scotland – especially along the coastal trade routes and in the larger towns. It does not seem unreasonable to assume that workers from Durham would have made their way north through Scotland to Kirkwall. It is also possible, and probable, that some workers would have left and stayed on at places like Selby, Dunfermline or Leuchars, whereas others would have joined the workforce at Kirkwall from other places altogether, continually adding to and changing the knowledge of styles and influences. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Kirkwall seems to have been intended as a scale model of the cathedral at Durham.

When Ragnvald Kolsson gained control of the islands it seems there were two fractions present. On one side were those who supported the claims of the ‘Paul-line’ and on the other would have been the kinsmen and supporters of St. Magnus and the ‘Erlend-line’. When Ragnvald’s claim to the islands proved successful he very soon set about fulfilling his vow of building a ‘minster at Kirkwall’. The cathedral he set out to build was indeed grander than any other in the land and seems to have been constructed in the image of the grand cathedral at Durham. Nevertheless, the building itself, however charming it may be, is nothing extraordinary in the grand scheme of European cathedral building and the decorative repertoire it displays cannot be said to contain any propaganda aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the people of Orkney. The cathedral contains many of the general elements of cathedral building, with its grotesque heads, chevron patterns, wall arcading and the odd Sheela-na-gigs, which, if not typical are not uncommon in Insular cathedral architecture, and do certainly not reflect on St. Magnus or Earl Ragnvald in any particular way. The iconographical program of Kirkwall cathedral does not set it much apart from other churches in Scotland or Northern England at that day and age. In erecting a building of this scale, in honour of his uncle, Ragnvald very cleverly, writes Thomson, “based his rule on a feudal

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<sup>267</sup> Cambridge in Crawford (1988), p. 111.

grant which emanated directly from heaven – it provided a legitimacy which it was difficult to dispute. It was propaganda at its most imaginative; modern attempts to manipulate public opinion are crude by comparison.”<sup>268</sup> It seems then, it is not so much the decorative language of the building that speaks to the people, but rather, I would imagine, the building itself.

The question that surrounds Kirkwall cathedral seems to be: why would one take on the titanic enterprise of erecting a large cathedral in the honour of St. Magnus, when the saint was already interred at Christchurch at Birsay where a bishop was already residing and a firmly established See was in place? His tomb, the saga says, had shortly after his death been surrounded by a heavenly light and miracles were said to happen there. It became, to a certain extent, a place of pilgrimage, and people travelled there from all over Orkney and Shetland to be cured of their ailing’s and to give praise to God and the late Earl Magnus.<sup>269</sup> In addition, it seems the bishops of Orkney also resided at Birsay and had the church there as their episcopal seat, even though there may be indications that they had other residences around the isles as well, as seems to have been the case with Bishop William the Old and Egilsay. Even so, Ragnvald, in his vow, promised to exhume the body of his murdered uncle, bring it to Kirkwall where he would spend vast amounts of time and money constructing a new church in his honour, and then, to move the episcopal seat there from Birsay where it had been firmly established for years already. According to the Orkneyinga Saga, the church at Birsay was built by the mighty Earl Thorfinn a century or so earlier. Thorfinn’s home was also at Birsay and with the earl and the bishop both in the same place it must have been somewhat of a centre of power, only a hundred or so years previously and probably also in Ragnvalds time. What was the reason for all this upheaval and why would Ragnvald want to break with tradition in the way that he did?

Ragnvald had fought hard to gain control of the islands and when he succeeded his second time around one would think that he would keep with the tradition of his forebears and leave the cathedral church at Birsay be. Perhaps even take up dwellings where Earl Thorfinn had done the same years before. Instead, he does the exact opposite. Breaks with tradition and moves the relics of his uncle, along with the resident bishop and whatever clergy there was to the small town of Kirkwall, where he takes on a massive undertaking that is sure to outlive himself. Some have suggested that it might be because Magnus’ residence while he was still alive might have been at Kirkwall.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Thomson (2008), p. 106.

<sup>269</sup> Pálsson & Edwards, (1981), p. 96.

<sup>270</sup> Dryden (1878), p. 15.

The Orkneyinga Saga notes that Earls Paul and Erlend divided the Earldom between them, “just as in the time of Thorfinn and Brusi.”<sup>271</sup> The saga does not reveal exactly how the land was divided, but it mentions at an earlier point that Brusi’s son, Ragnvald I Brusason, took up residence at Kirkwall. This is the first mention of Kirkwall in the saga. We know that Thorfinn’s residence was at Birsay and so it is plausible that Brusi, before Ragnvald I had his residence at Kirkwall as well and that the ‘Erlend-line’ continued this tradition while the ‘Paul-line’ settled at Birsay. This would also seem to explain why Ragnvald Kolsson, a nephew of St. Magnus would have chosen Kirkwall as the site for his new cathedral and why he wanted to strip Birsay and the rival fraction of both the See and the saint. At any rate, one must assume that there was a good reason why Ragnvald and Kol decided to build their cathedral at Kirkwall, and not at Birsay and I myself find myself a believer in the theory above.

Building a cathedral would no doubt be a long and costly affair and one that would require large amounts of funds as well as a substantial workforce that in this case would have had to be brought over from mainland Britain. Nevertheless, such an enterprise in such a small place would mean a substantial influx of people and money and it would no doubt have been beneficial to the small community of Kirkwall to become a destination for pilgrimage.<sup>272</sup> Not only would Ragnvald be the one who raised a cathedral and by doing so tightening his grip on the islands – he would also be the one responsible for economic growth and a certain prosperity, not only in and around the area of Kirkwall but throughout the islands in general. Also, if indeed Kirkwall was the preferred dwelling place of the ‘Erlend-line’ the large cathedral and the business that came with it would be a proper thorn in the side for ‘Paul-line’ at Birsay.

There is little doubt that Orkney and Kirkwall was in the centre of well-established trade routes of the day and no doubt they benefitted from this. Nevertheless the town would not have been a large one. In fact, as we have seen, it seems like the Kirkwall we know today is a product of later years and of economic growth. The Burgh in its early days seems to have been two small towns, and perhaps the construction of the cathedral was the starting point for the subsequent growth that would make the two hamlets join together. Having a major shrine like the St. Magnus cathedral would definitely be a factor in the growth of a town like Kirkwall. Kirkwall cathedral seems to have strong links, mainly to Durham, but indeed also to Dunfermline abbey as well as having certain familiarities with both Selby and Leuchars and

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<sup>271</sup> Pálsson & Edwards, (1981), p. 79.

<sup>272</sup> ‘St. Olaf’s Church’ in: <http://www.paparproject.org.uk/orkney7.html>

probably others as well. All of these buildings are found in Scotland, with the exception of Durham which is located just south of the Scottish border and seem to belong to an Anglo-Norman-Scots group of ecclesiastical architecture,<sup>273</sup> whereas the cathedral at Trondheim is mainly English in character, having close links to the cathedrals at, among others, Essex, Lincoln, York and Canterbury – all of which are located in the south of England.

## 9. Conclusion

After having reviewed the cathedral itself, the written saga account and a selection of secondary sources I have come to the conclusion that it is not possible to read any of the architectural elements displayed throughout the cathedral on their own, within the context of Ragnvald's claim to power. The different architectural elements of the cathedral are loaded with symbolism and meaning, but they are all within the framework of Christianity as a religion and does not seek to legitimize Ragnvald's claim to the islands. The building itself on the other hand, I believe, may well be seen as part of a strategy to assert power and create a sense of grandeur around Ragnvald's person as well as advocating some sort of divine side to his claims. The saga account leads us to believe that Ragnvald would erect the cathedral in honour of his late uncle as a thanksgiving for his divine assistance in conquering the islands. It does not, however, seem too far-fetched to also assume that in addition to being a symbol of gratitude the cathedral would also be a statement of Ragnvald's power. By encouraging the veneration of the bones of his uncle Magnus, Earl Ragnvald ensured a relationship with the heavens it would be difficult to contend with, strengthening his position as ruler of the islands. In addition the erection of a cathedral would most definitely cause a rise in the pilgrim and tourist industry and create somewhat of an economic boom in and around Kirkwall. It seems likely that as the economy and the town grew, the local milieu would have prospered and this in turn would be something that Ragnvald could take credit for and no doubt it would give him a high star among the people of Kirkwall, possibly the kinsmen and supports of the 'Erlend-line' as well as being a proper thorn in the side of the 'Paul-line' at Birsay, weakening their political position.

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<sup>273</sup> Lidén in Crawford (1988), p. 77.

## 10. Appendix

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**From:** Øystein Ekroll <[oeystein.ekroll@ntnu.no](mailto:oeystein.ekroll@ntnu.no)>

**To:** sindre vik <[sindre\\_v@yahoo.com](mailto:sindre_v@yahoo.com)>

**Sent:** Monday, September 19, 2011 6:01 PM

**Subject:** Re: Konsekrasjons kors i Nidarosdomen vs. Sankt Magnus katedraln i Kirkwall.

Den 19.09.2011 17:50, skrev sindre vik:

Hei Øystein!

Mitt navn er Sindre Vik. Jeg er student ved UiO og jeg skriver en masteroppgave om Sankt Magnus katedralen i Kirkwall på Orkenøyene. Der, i det sydlige transeptet, er hugget noe som av historikeren Tom Muir blir karakterisert som et tempelridder kors. Min veileder, Lena Liepe, sier at det er det ikke, men heller et *consecration cross* (jeg kommer ikke på det norske navnet i farten), av samme type som man finner i Nidarosdomen. Stemmer det at det finnes et lignende kors i Trondheimsdomen? Og hvor i så fall finner man dette lignende korset? Jeg har lagt ved et bilde jeg har tatt av Kirkwall korset slik at du kan kikke.

Beste hilsen fra Sindre Vik

Hei Sindre,

det norske uttrykket er 'innvielseskors'. Utifrå fotoet er eg usikker på om dette er eit slikt kors. Innvielseskors er ofte rissa inn i kalkpussen med passar og består av ein sirkel med eit kors inni. Det finst også slike kors uthogd i stein t.d. på Salisbury Cathedral (der er dei uvanleg nok plassert utvendig) og ikkje minst på katedralen i Kirkjubæjar på Færøyane, der dei er hogd ut av kleberstein og sikkert importert frå Norge. Eg har aldri før sett eit slikt innvielseskors som det du sender, og tvilar sterkt på at det er eit slikt. Det ser også ut til å stå usymmetrisk på veggfeltet, og eg har aldri sett slike innvielseskors som er hogd så grovt inn i veggen. Dei er som regel ein fot i diameter (har du mål på dette?) og står 2-3 meter over golvet (har du mål på dette også?).

Det er derimot vanleg med 'tilfeldige' kors hogd inn i veggane på kyrkjer, også innskårne i tre på stavkyrkjer og på dører. Det heng ofte saman med personleg kristendom, ved at det å lage eit kors var ei god handling. Muir sin teori om 'tempelriddarkors' ser eg på som heilt useriøst - slikt kors finst i mange utformingar.

Beste helsing  
Øystein Ekroll

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**From:** Øystein Ekroll <[oeystein.ekroll@ntnu.no](mailto:oeystein.ekroll@ntnu.no)>

**To:** sindre vik <[sindre\\_v@yahoo.com](mailto:sindre_v@yahoo.com)>

**Sent:** Wednesday, September 21, 2011 4:09 PM

**Subject:** Re: Konsekrasjons kors i Nidarosdomen vs. Sankt Magnus katedraln i Kirkwall.

Den 21.09.2011 15:55, skrev sindre vik:

Hei igjen, og takk for utrolig raskt svar. Det var hyggelig og imponerende!

Korset jeg sendte bile av er ikke spesielt stort, 12x12 cm. eller noe deromkring og befinner seg, ettersom jeg kan huske, snaue to meter over bakken. Ca. i ansiktshøyde på meg og jeg er

1,86 høy. Det står også, som du skriver, usymetrisk på stenen det er hugget i. Jeg synes også templeridderteorien til Muir høres litt søkt ut og kjøper mye heller det du skriver om personlig kristendom. Men, det er hugget ganske dypt og må ha tatt litt innsats å lage. Og det var vel ikke hvem som helst som bare kunne gå inn å hugge et kors i en kirkevegg - særlig ikke i en katedral.

I tillegg har Kirkwall katedralen, som nå er blitt sognekirke, et annet innvielseskors, som ser ut akkurat slik som du beskriver. Har lagt ved bilde. Det ville også vært underlig om to innvielseskors skulle ha så forskjellig utforming.

Takk igjen for tiden din!

Alt godt herifra!  
Sindre

Hei igjen Sindre,  
dette smaker meir av fugl! Finst det berre det eine eksemplaret av denne typen kors? Står det i det gotiske koret eller i den romanske delen av katedralen? Det skal vere 12 stk, men fleire kan jo ha blitt fjerna ved seinare ombyggingar e.l. Det første, vesle korset kan ha mange forklaringar, ikkje minst at det kan vise til ei gravlegging under golvet, eller rett og slett eit personleg religiøst uttrykk.

Mbh,  
Øystein

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